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The Role of the Family in Today's Priestly Vocation Crisis

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the current crisis in priestly vocations has deep roots in the crisis facing the family. Therefore, the author claims that the solution to the current priesthood crisis is possible by first resolving the family crisis. The first part of the article indicates the main challenges facing the family. The second part discusses the family as the source of every vocation (including priestly vocation). The third part addresses the problem of pastoral involvement in the process of awakening priestly vocations.

Keywords: Family, Vocation, Priesthood, Crisis.

These days, voices proclaiming the crisis in priestly vocations resonate widely, especially in the Western world. The statistics provided by the Vatican each year serve as ample evidence of how the priestly vocation crisis is breaking records in the West. Statistics published last year, in 2024, indicate that the number of priests in Europe and North America continues to decline significantly, with diocesan priests facing a greater reduction than religious priests.

This decline in the number of priests is accompanied by a crisis of faith among many Christians, predominantly tied to a crisis in family values. According to Cardinal Robert Sarah, the priesthood crisis is preceded by a spiritual crisis, observable not only among the ordinary faithful but also within the consecrated. This situation leads to a crisis of faith, a loss of meaning in Christian life, and a dilution of Judeo-Christian values. This moment of crisis compels us, as Christians and priests, to reflect on how we can give our lives a happy and Christian meaning.

We must remember that spiritual life is fundamentally a life in the Spirit, a relationship with God that encompasses all dimensions of the person. A spiritual crisis arises when our relationship with God lacks depth, leaving us unable to draw

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from it for our lives. Such a crisis signifies that connection with God has diminished or even vanished. Pope Francis has consistently identified what he terms "the technocratic paradigm" as the root cause of this crisis. We live in a society characterized by consumerism and utilitarian individualism, where the question of God has been marginalized. Religion is often confined to the private sphere.

In the face of this spiritual crisis, young people and families are influenced by various currents. As the Pope points out in *Fratelli Tutti*[1], we are all in the same boat, navigating a consumerist and materialistic society together. The violence we observe is indicative of the difficulty modern individuals face in finding a Christian meaning in life. The fundamental question this raises is: What role can the family play in this context of spiritual and vocational crisis to help young people respond positively to God's persistent call? This article endeavors to answer this crucial question. To overcome this crisis, we first need to acknowledge its seriousness and then maintain clarity of thought to implement measures that can help us transcend the crisis and rebuild on solid foundations.

This article will address three key points: the major challenges facing families today, the family as the source of every vocation, and a pastoral commitment to reawakening priestly vocations.

1. The Major Challenges Facing the Family

The modern crisis of the family manifests in various life domains. Certain values—such as fraternity, solidarity, sharing, and reconciliation—have diminished in strength. The involvement of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives in children's upbringing seems a relic of the past in some areas. Alarmingly, even in Africa, once characterized by strong familial solidarity, such values are nearly absent. Individualism is on the rise; previously, marriage signified an alliance between two families, but today it is often reduced to a union of two individuals. In the past, a child's education was not confined to the nuclear family but extended to the entire village.

Thus, the challenges are numerous and complex. This article will not enumerate all contemporary family challenges but will limit the discussion to a few that hinder effective education for today's youth, including destructive ideologies and media influences.

Destructive ideologies and anti-values, emanating from both external and internal sources, threaten families today. Methods are employed to dismantle the family, the bedrock of society. New family models are proposed, including single-parent families, blended families, adoptive families, traditional families, and extended families. The conflict between the sexes has supplanted class struggle;

[1] Pope Francis, *Exhortation postsynodal Amoris laetitia*, 2016, no. 32. (True, a worldwide tragedy like the Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together).

nevertheless, the objective remains the same: to foster division and undermine communion and complementarity. In this climate, how can families reclaim their place and fulfill their mission? In response to this situation, Pope John Paul II urged Christians to adopt an analytical and nuanced approach to these phenomena.

Sociologists note that the socio-cultural changes we are experiencing encourage new forms of marital and family life. They argue that we inhabit a radically altered world, one unrecognizable to our ancestors. Consequently, family models that held relevance in the 1800s, 1900s, or even the 1950s are often disconnected from current lifestyles. For instance, today's cohabitation of men and women without commitment has become commonplace, establishing a norm imposed on almost everyone. Practices once deemed unacceptable, like homosexuality, which was previously viewed as a punishable perversion, have now been legislated and popularized worldwide.

Under the weight of these destructive ideologies, the world is disoriented, devoid of reference points. Educating children in an environment marked by pernicious ideologies is an arduous task. Families in this context are progressively stripped of power over their children. Faith is publicly challenged, and in certain countries, any reference to it is condemned. A stark example is the removal of crucifixes from classrooms and public spaces—the cross, once a symbol of life for Christians, has become stigmatized and cast aside. Can one imagine a child raised in such an environment becoming a priest?

In addition to the many destructive ideologies wreaking havoc, work itself increasingly poses a major challenge for families today. In many countries, labor laws disregard employees' personal and family lives, reducing individuals to mere numbers. Personal, intimate, and spiritual values are sidelined. Couples, often due to work commitments, lack opportunities to spend quality time together. Even those religiously married may lead lives analogous to those of singles. Parents are frequently too preoccupied with work, travel, business, studies, and meetings, leaving little time for communication or for raising their children together. In many cases, overwhelming work hours necessitate working on Sundays and public holidays. Parents frequently lack the time to consider family issues or to experience the joy of shared living.

Lastly, the influence of media and social networks (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp) shapes our world view. Unfortunately, the articles, comments, photos, videos, and images shared on these platforms often misrepresent reality. Many individuals struggle to navigate digital communication, which, instead of fostering community, instead isolates people. The issue lies not with the internet and social media but rather with how we engage with and navigate the internet age. Online, one can find resources to support personal growth as well as those that contribute to the dissolution of individuality and social engagement.

What actions can we take in light of the myriad challenges confronting families, knowing their essential, original, and irreplaceable role in the transmission

of life and children's education? In this context of profound change, the future of families, the Church, and society hinges on the education of the new generation. The Church must enhance its pastoral care for families and remind individuals of the family's integral role in humanization. Despite the dire circumstances presented, the family remains and will continue to be the primary setting in which human and priestly vocations are nurtured and flourish.

2. The Christian Family – The Origin of Every Vocation

The family is an institution created and willed by God, serving as the environment where every human being is born, nurtured, and ultimately passes away. It plays a central role in human society, regarded as the sanctuary of life and the nucleus of every community. "The family, made up of a woman and a man, is the masterpiece of society", as stated by Pope Francis during a public audience[2]. Pope Pius XII emphasized that "the family is sacred; it is the cradle not only of children but also of the nation and its strength"[3]. John Paul II contended that the future of humanity lies in the family[4].

The family is pivotal in the integral formation of individuals. It is within the family that every vocation takes root, develops, and reaches fulfillment. Regarding the significance of the Holy Family, Pope Francis remarked, "I like to imagine the seminary as the family of Nazareth, in which Jesus was welcomed, protected, and prepared for the mission entrusted to him by the Father"[5]. The family plays a critical role in forming children for Christian and priestly life. In fact, the "Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis" indicates that priestly formation is an evolving process that commences in the family, continues in the parish, is consolidated in the seminary, and lasts a lifetime[6].

Given its importance and the role it plays in educating and socializing children, the protection and well-being of families must be a concern for every person, the State, and the Church. The institution of the family faces unprecedented threats today; the challenges it encounters raise profound questions about its future and, most importantly, its mission within human society and the Church.

2.1. Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family

From its first page to its last, Sacred Scripture prominently features the family. The Scriptures offer three distinct terms for referring to the family: one in Hebrew (bayith) and two in Greek (oikos and oikia). The Old Testament primarily utilizes the Hebrew term, while the New Testament employs the Greek origins.

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2 François*, Audience générale à la place saint Pierre de Rome, le 29 avril 2015*, cité par A. Carriere, *Il vocabulario di papa Francesco. Firmati da 50 giornalisti e scrittori*, Torino 2015, p. 130.

3 Ibidem, p. 129.

4 Jean Paul II, *Exhortation apostolique postsynodale Familiaris Consortio,* 1985, no. 86.

5 François, *Discours du Pape François prononcé au séminaire pontifical régional des Marches «Pio XI*», le 10 juin 2021.

6 Cfr. Congrégation pour le clergé, *Le don de la vocation sacerdotale. Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, Vatican 8 décembre 2016.

The Hebrew term "bayith", which designates the family in the Old Testament, is polysemous, signifying both the household and extending to the house of God[7], the temple, and the royal palace. "Bayith" evokes stability, security, and refuge, constituting an indivisible social unit[8].

The New Testament utilizes "oikos" and "oikia" to refer to the family or home. While both terms point toward the household, they do so with nuance: "oikos" refers to the physical building and household, while "oikia" pertains to the dwelling space[9]. For example, Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he wants to stay in his "oikos" (his household), and Lydia welcomes Paul and Silas into her "oikos" (Acts 16:15). The differentiation between the two terms reflects a semantic overlap that encompasses both material (building) and sociological (family) dimensions.

Essential for human development and fulfillment, the family embodies the Second Vatican Council's assertion that it serves as a school of human enrichment and a community of salvation, presenting the conjugal community as foundational to society[10].

Central to the Church's teachings, the family is described in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World as the fundamental cell of human society[11], while the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity refers to it as the "sanctuary of the Church in the home"[12], and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church characterizes it as the "domestic church"[13]. Such descriptors carry significant meaning and explicitly reflect the Church's Christian vision of the family.

The Church assigns a unique and vital function to family, asserting that it guarantees the existence and growth of the Church. It affirms, as articulated by the Second Vatican Council, that "new members of the city of man are born, from whom the grace of the Holy Spirit, through baptism, will make sons of God, so that the people of God may be perpetuated throughout the centuries"[14]. Additionally, the Church views the love between spouses as a duty and responsibility, inviting them to safeguard this love, which forms the foundation of all matrimonial bonds. This love, instilled by the Creator within their hearts and blessed by Him, constitutes the essential element that allows the family to fulfill its vocation and mission.

The family is the birthplace of every vocation and, furthermore, serves as the primary context in which each person responds to God's call (Is 6:8; Jer 1:4-8).

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7 J.M. Fenasse, M.F. Lacan, Maison dans Léon-Dufour (dir.), *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*, Cerf, Paris 1997, col. 694.

8 H.A. Hoffner, *Bayith*, dans H. Ringgren Botterweck (dir.), *Grande lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, I, Brescia 1988, p. 1275-1294.

9 D. Margérat, *L'aube du christianisme. Labor et fides*, Genève 2008, p. 446.

10 Concile Vatican II, *Constitution pastorale sur l'Eglise de ce temps Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 52.

11 Ibidem.

12 Concile Vatican II, *Décret sur l'apostolat des laïcs Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1965, no. 11.

13 Idem, *Constitution dogmatique sur l'Eglise, Lumen Gentium*, 1964, no. 11.

14 Ibidem.

The Christian family, as the domestic church, provides a privileged space for vocation birth and nurturing. The family acts as the first seminary and house of formation. This formative stage is so crucial that if a young person misses out on familial education, it becomes challenging to recover what parents should have instilled, despite access to excellent formators. Pope Francis emphasizes that "family ties are fundamental in strengthening healthy self-esteem in seminarians"[15]. He also underscores the vital role families play in supporting their children throughout their seminary experience and beyond. According to the Holy Father, this familial support realistically enhances and strengthens seminarians. The family significantly contributes to nurturing children's vocations during formation and throughout their ministry. In their maternal and paternal roles, families help mold young hearts to prepare them to serve others generously and lovingly.

In a time when the priesthood faces a profound crisis, the role of parents assumes even greater significance. Families ensure that their children remain steadfast on their paths toward perfection and service to the Lord. In an increasingly hostile and unkind world, where attitudes toward the Church and its ministers grow increasingly negative, the only secure environment for support remains the family. Yet, for the family to serve as this refuge, it requires certain Christian and human values. The family can only fulfill its mission of nurturing vocations if it is imbued with Gospel values.

2.2. The Function of the Family and Priestly Formation

The Catholic family carries a significant responsibility to educate its children spiritually, intellectually, and morally[16]. The Second Vatican Council asserts that "children should be educated so that when they are adults, with full responsibility, they can follow their vocation, including a religious vocation, and choose their state in life. If they marry, they should be able to found their own family in favorable moral, social, and economic conditions"[17]. This noble mission is not confined to the family unit but extends to society and the Church as a whole. Proper execution of these functions is foundational to the flourishing of individuals within the human community.

The functions of the family within society hold considerable importance. Family specialists identify several functions, but this discussion will focus on three key ones that relate to our analysis: the procreative function, the educational function, and the economic function. Notably, we will emphasize the educational function, as it is particularly relevant to our discussion. These functions fall within the family's inherent mission. Before delving into these three functions, it is necessary to define what we mean by the function of a family. In this context, the function encompasses the specialized, permanent activities, and interactions among family members, resulting from tasks they undertake—and for

[15] François, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 203.
[16] Concile Vatican II, *Constitution pastorale sur l'Eglise de ce temps*, no. 52.
[17] Idem, *Declaration Gravissimum educationis*, 1965, no. 3.

which they may have varying levels of awareness—within the frameworks set by prevailing norms and models, leading to specific primary and secondary effects[18].

Having established a definition of family function, we now explore the role of each within the family. Each function involves numerous essential tasks, highlighting the family's significance for its members and society.

a) *The Procreative Function*: Satisfying the sexual and parental needs of spouses ensures both the biological continuity of the family and society. The family's mission is to serve life, participating in divine creative and sustaining forces. By giving birth to offspring, the family transmits the image of God from one person to another. Serving life involves not only the physical act of birth but also, more importantly, passing on the mystery of supernatural life and moral and spiritual principles. As the domestic church, the family is tasked with proclaiming and serving the Gospel of life. The Second Vatican Council defines the family as the primary and life-giving cell of society, playing a vital role in both group and individual development. Personality traits formed within families carry over into society, where altruistic attitudes cultivated in the family transform into societal skills and interpersonal solidarity. Consequently, the family is integral to humanizing and empowering society.

b) *The Educational Function*: This function enables families to create optimal conditions for effective child socialization. The Second Vatican Council teaches that "the role of parents is, in fact, to create a family atmosphere animated by love and piety towards God and man, which favors integral education"[19]. The task of education encompasses introducing children to society and nurturing them for a successful life. The family holds an irreplaceable role in children's education (educationem prolis ordinatum)[20]. Parents are fundamentally their children's primary educators, a right and duty rooted in natural law. The connection between giving life and the responsibility of education is a necessary continuum. John Paul II articulated three characteristics of parents' rights and responsibilities in education: they are essential (due to life transmission), original and primary (in relation to other educational agents), and irreplaceable and inalienable (neither usurpable nor entirely delegable)[21]. As such, the Church teaches that parents significantly influence their children's education because the bond of love connecting parents and children is unique; if parents fail, recovery can be challenging. Since God created humanity out of love and called individuals to love as He loves, parents' educational mission cannot stray from teaching love[22]. Love defines the family and its responsibilities. Each specific duty within the family becomes an expression of the fulfillment of this fundamental mission.

18 P. Mazur, *Podstawy pedagogiki pastoralnej*, Krakow 2011, p. 312.
19 Cfr. Concile Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*.
20 Idem, *Gravissimum educationis*, no. 3.
21 Cfr. ICC, c. 1055, & 1.
22 Concile Vatican II, *Gravissimum educationis*, no. 3.

Thus, love is the essence and objective of family education. The upbringing of children is the continuation of marital love. José Maria often urged married couples: "Love one another deeply, for the Lord is very pleased when you love one another"[23]. Thus, education must naturally extend from both fatherhood and motherhood, requiring the commitment of both spouses[24]. Families must recognize that other agents are partners, but can never replace them: schools, parishes, clubs, and various groups. For them, raising children is a natural duty inherent to their state in life.

c) *The Economic Function*: While this function satisfies the family's economic needs, it also ensures that individual aspirations of family members are met. This function is concerned with members' lives, behaviors, culture, and the difficulties they encounter.

Additionally, other family professionals highlight the affective life as central to individual existence, particularly concerning educational activities. Emotional bonds permeate family dynamics and relationships. Severing a child from its mother can lead to profound physical and psychological developmental issues.

The phenomenon of "street children" prevalent in our cities represents a societal scourge bearing significant consequences. These children, deprived of parental affection, exist in unstable environments fraught with insecurity, leading them to develop self-defense mechanisms that manifest as hostility and aggression. This regression is similarly observed in individuals raised outside a parental environment or from dysfunctionality. These mechanisms connect to a lack of internal comfort and trust issues stemming from parental detachment.

From both educational and pastoral standpoints, the religious function is crucial for the spiritual and moral growth of children. Nearly all Magisterial documents affirm that the family represents the environment for a child's initial religious initiation. The *Optatam Totius* decree identifies the family as the first seminary[25]. Parents bear the primary duty of evangelizing their children. Within the family, parents carry an obligation to instill religious values in their offspring, significantly shaping their religious attitudes. The family is tasked with various functions and missions, though its central mission remains religious.

It is crucial to distinguish between the functions and missions of the family. A mission entails a collective action aimed at achieving a defined goal for a larger group. The *Familiaris Consortio*[26] exhortation outlines four fundamental missions for the Christian family[27]: the formation of a community of persons, the service of life, participation in societal development, and engagement in the life and mission of the Church.

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23 Jean Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 36.

24 Cfr. Jean Paul II, *A l'image de Dieu, homme et femme*, Paris 1998.

25 Concile Vatican II, *Décret sur la formation des prêtres optatam totus Ecclesiae renovationem*, 1965, no. 2.

26 Idem.

27 Jean Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 17.

3. Pastoral Commitment to Awakening Vocations to the Priesthood

The family crisis profoundly impacts the priestly vocation. As emphasized, priestly vocations arise, grow, and are nourished within families through Gospel values. It is illogical to discuss awakening priestly vocations while overlooking the family's involvement. A pastoral commitment to healthy families underpins the effective awakening of priestly vocations. Pastoral care prioritizing family in evangelizing efforts will return us to the core of the Gospel. Now more than ever, families require renewed spiritual guidance that brings Christ and His Gospel to the forefront of their lives. Reaffirming our commitment to Jesus Christ is essential for renewing Christian fervor in contemporary families. Only a healthy family, living the Gospel daily, can fulfill its mission and vocation.

The Church reminds us that parents are the first missionaries to their children, the primary catechists[28]. Within the family, children learn the name of God and the love of neighbor. Parents bear the primary responsibility for instructing their children in the sign of the cross, prayer, and living out Gospel values. However, for families to transmit these values effectively, they themselves must embody and live them. By modeling good behavior, parents teach their children to become good Christians. Grounded in this faith, children can respond to the Lord's call, equipped to discern His voice amid a chorus of distractions.

The contemporary crisis in priestly vocations can be framed through the lens of the crisis the family faces today. Families are undergoing an unprecedented crisis, and children are its primary victims. How can we expect a child raised in a separated, divorced, single-parent, or blended family to emulate the behavior of someone from a healthy family environment? How can a child whose parents neglect prayer or attending Mass cultivate their vocation? In what context can desire for a vocation arise without family or parental examples to guide them? It is crucial for every pastor to recognize that the future of the priesthood is inherently linked to the future of the family. The fate of families is intertwined with the fate of society, the Church, and the priesthood. Generally speaking, healthy vocations emanate from strong families, albeit with some exceptions. Thus, awakening priestly vocations necessitates a renewed commitment to pastoral care for the family. The *Optatam Totius* and *Perfectae Caritatis* decrees underscore that the promotion of vocations involves not only parish priests but predominantly parents[29]. An effective family ministry today emphasizes personalization, welcoming each family as it presents itself, and accompanying them according to their circumstances and levels of Christian life. By personalizing family ministry, we can better understand and address the challenges families face. If seminaries are currently vacated or filled with wounded individuals, the roots of these issues lie genuinely within familial contexts. Although families play a pivotal role in this crisis, they cannot shoulder the responsibility alone; they

[28] CEC, no. 2223.

[29] Concile Vatican II, *Optatam totus*, no. 2; *Perfectae caritatis*, no. 24.

require the support and guidance of national policies and the Church. Without external assistance, families may struggle to fulfill their mission.

Conclusion

This article aims to demonstrate that the ongoing crisis in priestly vocations has deep roots in the crisis confronting families. It is impossible to engage with the current situation without considering the family crisis. Families play a critical role in awakening priestly vocations. The Church, in her maternal wisdom, must cultivate personalized family ministry that accounts for the unique situations of each family. Recognizing that each family is unique and possesses its distinct issues, a blanket approach to family pastoral care will not enhance the current vocational crisis. Furthermore, solution efforts necessitate genuine collaboration among all stakeholders invested in family matters, each operating within their capacity.

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