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CHALLENGES OF PARENTING IN A POST-MODERN AGE

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Abstract
The family is the vital cell of the society and the domestic Church. The importance of the family to the Church and the society at large was reflected upon in the Synod on the Family which generated the Post Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia. As the document focuses around families, it examined its challenges among other aspects of it. Our major concern in this paper is the fact that family values are fast eroding, and parenting is becoming a more difficult task. The impact is felt in all sectors of life in the society and the Church. The youth of today are different from those of past years, while parenting has also changed in the 21st Century. This change is grossly traced to the challenges confronting family life in Post-Modern time. It has become more difficult for the young ones today to hear God's voice because of the risks of suffocation amid other voices presented to them. The experience of the young ones in the family today differs greatly from that of past years and this, without any doubt, threatens the nucleus of societal and ecclesial life. The objective of this paper is to examine some of these challenges and how parents can be given pastoral assistance to bring the kind of parental authority that their children need into the family from the point of view of Amoris Laetitia.

Keywords: Challenges, Family Life, Societal Values, Christian Theology, Post-Modern Age.

I. Introduction

Post-Modernity refers to the more intellectual form of thinking associated with technology; it is characterized with mega trends like changing technology, migration, and urbanization. The 21st Century, which spans from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2100, is with all certainty enclosed in the Post-Modern Age. The phenomenon of this age affects our personality with serious consequence on the family. The importance of the family to the ecclesial and civil communities is very vital since it is the cell of both. The family, which is the focus of this paper, is situated in the cultural context of the Post-Modern Age. This very fact made the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to call the attention of the Universal Church to focus on the family, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.

The family is a community of husbands and wives, of parents and children, of relatives. (John Paul II, 1981, Section 18). It is in the family that the mutual giving of self on the part of man and woman, united in marriage, creates an environment of life in which the children develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny. The family creates an environment of life in which children develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity, and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny. (John Paul II, 1988, Section 23) The family constitutes the making up of every individual who eventually forms the body of the community and the general human society, therefore, when the family background of an individual is faulty, the society at large is affected. The family is a privileged community called to sharing cooperation as parents in

their children's upbringing. (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004:121), This emphasizes the role and importance of parents who are the pillars of the family.

There are many challenges facing the family today, and parenting is one area of the problems of the family, which is being threatened by the ills of the contemporary trends. It is perceived today that we are living in an age where moral rectitude is no longer valued among people as the world is fast drifting away from the authentic values of life. The family in the contemporary society is caught up in the shadow, in the preservation of its original norms and values.

The family today, in different ways at different places, is under pressure because of the influence of the post-modern technological development. This poses serious challenges to parenting in the 21st century. This challenge is also affecting the size of families today as many married couples are beginning to cut down on the number of children they should have, while a few others are out-rightly rejecting the responsibility of procreating as a result of the difficulties presented in the up-hill task of parenting.

II. Fundamental Responsibility of Parents

The key term in this paper is "parenting", which comes from the word "parent", whose Latin root is "*parens*" or *"pareo"*, meaning to give birth, but today the meaning of the word and the process referred to as parenting is wider than this root. According to Beverly Fagot, "parenting entails, not only giving birth, but providing, not only for the child's physical well-being, but also providing warmth and security to insure good psychological adjustment, discipline for moral development, and stimulation for intellectual growth."(Fagot, 1995:163) This implies that it is not every woman who brings a child to the world or every man who fathers a child that automatically qualifies to be called a parent. Parenting has been described as the most challenging and complex of all the tasks of adulthood.(Francis, 2016, section 84) Parenting is a wonderful joy. The major happiness of a couple is the joy of parenthood, which comes with the gift of the children that God showers on the couple.(Francis, 2016, section 80 & 81; Vatican Council II, 1965, section 48) This joy becomes a wholesome joy when the child or children of a couple make them proud in the society. The joy of parenthood, without any doubt, comes with a responsibility. "The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of childrenbut must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation." (Catholic Church, 221). When a couple, during the pronouncement of the marital vows at their wedding, resolve to accept children lovingly from God, they, by implication, accept the responsibility that goes with the up-bringing of children. The fundamental responsibility of parents towards their children could be classified into three categories, namely: academic, moral, and spiritual formation. "The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. The rights and duties of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable."(Catholic Church, 221) Maurus, in his book titled, *It's Human Relations thatCount*, identified the roles of the different members of the family as follows, "parents for example have always required, and still requires, from their children obedience and respect, children, in turn, from their parents understanding and security. A husband seeks loyalty from his wife. A wife seeks protection from her husband. And the binding factor in such relationship is love." (Maurus, 2010:21) Parents can only win obedience and respect from their children after they must have fulfilled

their own obligations towards their children. Both parents, through the grace of the sacrament of marriage, receive the responsibility and privilege of evangelizing their children. They are to initiate their children at an early stage into the mysteries of faith of which they are the first heralds for their children.(Catholic Church, 2225-2230)

The specific role of the father is particularly important as he is to his children what God is to humanity. He plays the role of a provider, a protector, a progenitor, and a guardian in the family. (Scott, 2011:41). As a protector, on the father lies the responsibility to provide security for the family, ensuring a secure and conducive atmosphere that will enhance the proper growth of the children. The role of the father as a provider entails meeting the material needs as well as the spiritual and moral needs of the family. Considering all these, the active presence of the father is particularly important for the training of family members. (Vatican Council II, 1964, section 11) The absence of a father makes parenting difficult for single mothers because the father is generally seen as a symbol of discipline.

The mother, likewise, has a central role to play in the home. The children, especially the younger ones, depend considerably on her or almost for everything. She is the first educator of the child and the care giver to every member of the family, including the father. She inculcates the best of values in their children from the very tender age.

III. Styles of Parenting

The styles of parenting have changed. Children today are brought up to be independent. The biggest challenge of parenting today is raising children who are independent in thought and empowered to take decisions for themselves. The challenges are tougher as children grow older. The implications of the developmental and contextual changes that occur in a child and particularly during adolescence in parents' task alters the task. This is the most turbulent time for parents in their parenting task because of the changes and challenges which occur in multiple systems. The changes in adolescence are undertaken with the goal of promoting increased autonomy. (Holmbeck, Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn 1995:96)Therefore parents must know how to cope with the multiple changes which call for flexibility and fluidity on their part in order to assist their children manage this. There are different parenting styles and there is no uniform style because different factors often influence the method of parenting adopted by the individual but in this paper, we are considering only three of them which are: authoritarian, permissive and democratic

1. Authoritarian Style

Some parents are out rightly authoritarian in their style of parenting. An authoritarian parent is one who expects his or child to obey and carry out orders as he/she is told without questioning the order of the parent. They operate their family like the military camp, they apply the "obey before complain" formula. A parent who is authoritarian is quite different from a parent who is a disciplinarian and a distinction between discipline and punishment will make for a better understanding of this difference. Discipline is oriented at helping a child to make responsible choices for themselves. It uses non-violent measures to reinforce the desired outcome. Discipline respects people for who they are, and the soteriological principle of effective discipline is that human beings make mistakes but can learn from those mistakes. (Saso & Saso, 1999:94)

Punishment uses fear-based techniques to control behaviour. It makes children to rely on the external outcomes in deciding what choices to make. Punishment is about exerting pain and control. Punishment appears to inhibit negative behaviour in children and is more extreme, more dysfunctional, less consistent, and more damaging to the child.(Holmbeck, Paikoff&Brooks-Gunn1995:96) Punishment is the authoritarian parent's main tool of enforcing his/her authority. Whenever the child flaunts or disobeys the orders of the parents, he/she receives a punishment which is meant to inflict pain on him/her. This pain is effected either through hitting, slapping, and shouting, yelling or by taking away some privileges, or adding extra chores to the usual ones given to the child.(Holmbeck, Paikoff&Brooks-Gunn1995:93-94) It does not build responsibility or self- control in a child but rather breeds resentment, revenge, or retreat in a child.

2. **Permissive Style**

In permissive style of parenting, parents allow their children too much power and control in the family. The children are too independent and often there is role confusion as the child often acts as the parents in the family and dictates what he/she wants and the way it should be done. Children in such families are out of control because there is too much freedom and scanty limits if there is any at all. Permissive parenting is not limited only to extreme cases, there could be instances of permissive parenting in other styles when parents may be permissive in few ways either by rescuing them from a disciplinary action or out-rightly pampering them. This style of parenting could only result in the self-destruction of the child, and sorrow and regrets for the parent. (Holmbeck, Paikoff&Brooks-Gunn1995:96).

3. **Democratic Style**

The Democratic style of parenting seems to be a healthy and ideal style for any parent. The parents in this style display a degree of warmth and affection towards the child. This style of parenting allows the child freedom but within limits. The soteriological principle of democratic style of parenting allows parents and children equal value as human beings and both have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Though all members are equal in dignity but are not equal in authority. The parents are the authority figure and have the leadership role. In a democratic family all the members have a right to express their thoughts and feelings as well as the right to be heard but this does not mean that they are free to do whatever they like or disregard their parents. As much as they have their voices heard they do not always have their way.(Holmbeck, Paikoff& Brooks-Gunn 1995:101). The parents acknowledge that their child's perspective may be different from theirs, but by induction they legitimize their authority and help the child to see from their parent's perspective. This style of parenting provides a safe and sure environment for the children to learn and grow. The children from the family which adopts this style will be responsible as freedom in such an environment evokes responsibility.

IV. Challenges

Parents today face what may be unprecedented levels of social and economic stress. The growing incidence of such major problems such as poverty, violence, crime, substance abuse

makes it difficult for parents to create a decent life for themselves, much less protect their children from the harm that may be generated from the media culture and plan for their future.

1. Changing Moral Values

The world has changed drastically, and children today are different from children in the past generations because of societal and modern cultural influences. In this age it is not truly clear regarding who runs the home or calls the shots in families; is it the parents or children? In this age children are outspoken, fearless, and less obedient and in a hurry to be independent of their parents. The world they live in today is less predictable and the system does not offer much help to parents who are trying to raise responsible children.

In the past we are conscious of personal morality, before a young person takes to any vice, he/she will think of the loyalty he owes to his family and would not want to challenge the family authority. The sense of sin and decency is almost completely lost in today's world due to changing moral values.

2. Penetration of the Modes of Mass Communication in the Home

The children in this generation are digitally proficient and parents are facing new challenges on how to discipline their children as far as social media is concerned. Social media is good, but we cannot downplay its negative influence. The influx of mass media and audio-visual media on children could be quite damaging. Technologies and technological gadgets, including, cell phones, computers, internet constitute the world of the children of this age. The home is invaded by the media culture which takes its toll on family relationships as parents no longer spend time with their children while children have little or no interaction with their parents. The children are at liberty in their use of the internet which they surf without any parental guide.

3. Societal Values

Parenting and traditional parenting roles have changed so much today. In the past, children used to return home from school to their parents, particularly, to the mothers who were full-time housewives. Mothers stayed back at home to mind the home while the fathers were at work. Today both parents must work long hour to the detriment of the children who are left at the mercy of house helps, nannies or the so called "lesson teachers". Since both parents return home at night exhausted and stressed, they are rendered incapable of giving that parental care that is needed for their children because they themselves are battling to take care of their own emotional needs at that point. This often results in poor parenting.

Different factors are responsible for the new situation in families which now make both parents part of the working class. These range from poor economic situation which forces the mother to also work to support the husband in fending for the family. In extremely poor families even the children are not left out in the struggle to make their own contributions towards the family economy by hawking goods.

The feminist movement could also be accounted as responsible for the change in the economic and social roles of women in the family. In recent times, there is a kind of revolution in the understanding and practice of the traditional role of women, which was that of the wife and mother of the family. The transition from the traditional to contemporary role in which the womenfolk want to justify their hard-earned professional qualifications has thrown most families into very vulnerable situations, which are in turn, truncating the vitality of the family. This has changed the character of domestic work so that women are no longer restricted to the kitchen or home. The number of women in the formal labour force is tremendously on the increase. Working class mothers face a dilemma of split roles. Their role of caring for their children is adversely affected by their work outside the home. The problem here actually is not the fact that mothers now work but that they are engaged in a type of work that takes them away from their family the whole day. Consequently, the role of the family as the major socializing agent has been drastically reduced, while the peer group, the school and the workplace now play greater roles in both the lives of children and parents.

Some social activities such as clubbing also contribute to this problem since this keeps the father away from home till when the children are already in bed. The father's presence is especially important in the up-bringing of children. The social functions at weekends also deprive the families the opportunity of being together. Since parents have little or no time for giving orientations to their children, the influence of the influx of negative peer pressures then becomes overwhelming to them.

4. Single Parenting

The rate of single parents especially mothers is alarmingly on the increase today. Broken marriages, teenage pregnancy, death of a partner are all accidental factors that lead to single parenting, apart from those who have chosen this as a state of life. There is little or nothing one can do against "accidental single parenthood", but the culture of single parenthood as a state of life should be frowned at and discouraged by the Church and the society at large. Intentional Single parenthood, as a state, and divorce negate God's purpose for the institution of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

There is extra challenge on the parent who is in possession of the child. Many single parents are often stressed up and battling with their own emotional problems which incapacitates them from paying attention to their children's problems. Children raised by a single parent appear vulnerable to a wide variety of social problems and are at risk for developmental difficulties.(Parke, 1995:66). There is a limit to which a single parent can adequately care for a child, consequently, they end up increasing the number of "deformed" children in the society. Raising a child is more difficult for single parents because the joint effort of both parents is necessary to make the formation of a child wholesome.

5. Role Models

The smartness of the children of this age makes it difficult for them not to perceive any problem at home between their parents. They are quick to observe and imitate adults in

their behaviour at home therefore, parents need to be extra careful especially when they are not being good models to their children. Bad examples and scandals found among persons in position of authority in homes and offices, in politics and even in the religious circles, are quickly copied by children.(Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, 2015) Most kids are left un-monitored in their use of mass media from which most of them watch a lot of crime and immoral scenes which they try to act out. Most of the children's role models on television are not always characters that any one grooming children for a better society would recommend.

V. Pastoral Assistance to Parents

It can be argued that there is no undertaking that is more important to the life of the human community than parenting. This is simply because, the manner of parenting definitely affects the society, be it good or bad, it is reflected in the quality of individuals that the families turn into the society. The Church should be concerned about the challenges that parents are facing in bringing up children in the 21st Century, because its impact is being greatly felt in the Church. Parents lament and agonize over their children's attitude to life despite their efforts to make them grow in the right direction. Formators in houses of formation of Religious communities and the Seminaries of the Church are perpetually singing songs of lamentation over the breed of "formatees" entrusted to their care. The task of formation has become heavily compacted with the "carry overs" from the homes, in such a way that their job is not limited to formation to the Consecrated life and the Priesthood but also includes formation of characters which should have been done by the family.

The importance and centrality of the parents with regards to the society is underlined in the Sacred Scriptures. (Pontifical Council for Peace, 2004:110) Parents are co-workers with God. With the command, "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen.1:28, The New King James Version) which underlines their role as procreator, they are involved in the work of creation. Parenting could be parallel to gardening, where the gardener cultivates the soil with care, love, and dedication, pruning the plant and making sure it gets sufficient sunlight so that a bountiful harvest may be reaped. The right and duty of parents to educate their children is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore cannot be delegated to others or be usurped by others.(John Paul II, 1988, section 36) Since parents have the responsibility to be the first educator of their children they can reduce the impact and influence of the age on their children if they have diligently fulfilled their obligations towards them. Creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and interest service is the order of the day is an antidote to the challenges of parenting. Since the home is well suited for education in virtues, parents should teach their children to subordinate the material and instinctual dimension to interior and spiritual ones. (Catholic Church, 223). Parents are under moral imperative to show good example to their children. The concrete example and living witness of parents is fundamental and irreplaceable in educating their children. If parents fail in this responsibility from the onset, then parenting becomes an exceedingly difficult and challenging task.

The Church, in her Social doctrine, teaches that particular attention must be given to the issue of the work of parents in the family and in particular to the recognition of "housekeeping" in such a way that it is socially recognize and valued also by means of economic compensation in keeping with that of other types of work.(John Paul II, 1981, section 23) The Church also teaches that care must be taken to eliminate all obstacles to the responsibilities of women, particularly those that do not allow them to carry out fully their maternal role. (John Paul II, 1981, section 19) Parents should be well educated in parenting task during marriage preparation, while preparing for the birth of their child, even as the child or the children are growing, as the case may be. Appropriate education for the different stage in the developmental and contextual changes of children should be offered to parents. Parenting styles and practices should be reviewed to suit the different stages in the growth of a child.

In the document Amoris Laetitia, the Holy Father calls on the Church to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives to assist them in the fulfilment of their educational mission. They must be helped to appreciate their proper role and to realize that they are ministers to their children's education. (Francis 2016, section 85)

It is a known fact that the civil community rarely offers adequate guidance, support, or preparation for parenthood. With today's mobile lifestyle and family structure, even the cross-generational passing down of wisdom that once occurred is no longer common. The civil authority should consider it a sacred duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and family and to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality and promote domestic prosperity. There should also be welfare legislation and provision of various kinds made for the protection and assistance of those who unfortunately have been deprived of the benefits of family life. (Rodger & Drostan, 1982:162). There is a great need for effective education and creating awareness of the various tendencies affecting marriage and extending to family life.

VI. Conclusion

These challenges of parenting are obvious menace to the family, and this is a basic motivation for the Church to rise and influence the Gospel's credibility in the workings of the family life. Since the family as an essential community, sets the pace upon which one begins to imbibe the necessary values of life from childhood, attention must be paid to the family by both the Church and the state. The Church must never relax nor become complacent to the need of promoting the ideal Christian family. The Church must conscientize parents to see to the adequate up-bringing of their children in moral, spiritual, and secular education. The Church must also constantly bring to the consciousness of the state, by forming its moral conscience in its responsibility towards the family which is situated in the state.

By way of conclusion, I would be offering some guidelines with which parents can improve on their style of parenting, which would bring about a positive change in their struggles to build a morally-sound 21st century society. Parenting today is lot different from what it used to be in the past. It is going through constant evolution, and therefore, parents need to update their knowledge of their children and their world. For parents to have a peaceful time parenting their children and ward, the following guidelines useful in carrying out this task.

- Parents should understand the world a child is exposed to and except they do this they will not understand why they act the way they do sometimes.
- Parents should give their children room to grow and should not suffocate them.
- Parents should respect their children and when they do that the children will respect them in return.
- Parents should give them more of a listening ear and not scolding or dishing out instructions always.
- Parents should discipline their children when there is need for that.
- Parents should not try to change their children for they cannot change them, but can modify how they interact with them, taking into consideration the fact that the children are growing in an age which is different from that in which they themselves grew up.
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Since parents cannot prevent their children from interacting on the internet, they themselves should understand how the internet works and know how to monitor and control their children's usage of it. Parents can and should monitor their children on the use of media in the home, but, since they also make use of the media outside the home, they can only do this by imparting values that will enable the children to make responsible decisions and choices.

A general problem that many parents often encounter as a challenge in raising their children is the fact that many parents do not know their children and they are not even aware that raising various kinds of children comes with different challenges. Raising a talented child is different from raising an aggressive or withdrawn child; raising a boy is different from raising a girl, and when parents have more than a child, they need to pay attention to the manner in which they bring up their children in order to avoid unhealthy rivalry in the home (Bornstein, 1995:ix). Children today, more than ever before need acceptance, love, esteem, spiritual and emotional support as well as material comfort, which make healthy childhood possible.

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