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Challenges and Destructive Practices for the Contemporary Family

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Abstract

This study presents the changes and challenges facing the family in the age of consumerism: abortion, divorce, cohabitation, abandonment of children, and tireless pursuit of pleasures. A special attention is devoted to cohabitation and its consequences which result in further weakening the family life. Along with this diagnosis of modern family problems, the Christian perspective is presented claiming its continual validity, based on the fact that marriage is a mystery of God planted in creation and perfected in the Church, appealing every human person.

Keywords

Family, modernism, consumerism, cohabitation, marriage, Church

I. Introduction

Today's society has greatly perverted the meaning of marriage and family. We live in a time when there is talk of "trial marriage"¹; at the same time, many sins are committed within the family that threatens its stability. Abortion, divorce, cohabitation, abandonment of children, and tireless pursuit of pleasures are the wounds and enemies of marriage and the Christian family and of any conjugal home, as well as of human society in general. The perversion or imitation of natural moral values, such as love, humility, self-denial and the spirit of sacrifice, lead to individualism and selfishness, and consequently to the disintegration of marriages, the disappearance of family life and to a great social crisis and mental suffering; and this is because people, increasingly egocentric, can no longer and do not know how to live together; moving away from the God of love, it is no wonder that man can no longer experience love with his peers in society.

II. A brief description of the family reality in contemporary society

Philosopher and sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky, a professor at the University of Grenoble, shows that the "spirit of consumption" has infiltrated relationships even within the family – in addition to religion, politics, trade unionism, culture, and free time² –, and relationships and the way of life have entered an "era of commoditization"³. The family is increasingly focused on consumption that exceeds "the scale of physiological needs"⁴, Lipovetsky speaking of "household pluralization" (two cars, two

¹ In France, for example, the cohabitation of young people, without being married, was called "semi cohabitation", and the Finns use the English expression "living apart together" ("living apart together independently") – J Hoffmann NOWOTNY, "The Future of the Family", in: *European Population Conference, 1987, Plenaries*, Central Statistical Office of Finland, Helsinki, 1987, pp. 125, 160. Also, a recent study done in Great Britain shows that in this country more people marry and who previously lived in cohabitation, than people who were single and are getting married.

² Gilles LIPOVETSKY, *Fericirea paradoxală. Eseu asupra societății de hiperconsum*, transl. Mihai Ungureanu, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2007, p. 303.

³ Gilles LIPOVETSKY, *Fericirea paradoxală...*, p. 18.

⁴ Gilles LIPOVETSKY, *Fericirea paradoxală...*, p. 85.

televisions, two music systems, several computers, telephones etc.) and “turbo-consumers”⁵, which buy not only what constitutes a real help in everyday life, but seeks to buy “what gives pleasure”, consumption being reshaped under the “sign of the individual”. Beyond the facilities brought by new technologies and technological advances accessible to all through which human life becomes “easier”, the author shows that it is possible that by delving into the consumerist logic, man depersonalizes himself, the known forms of sociability disappear, and the most uplifting feelings of the human beings to be suppressed⁶.

Family life becomes a place where the emphasis falls on the individual and his personal pleasures that can be satisfied through various acquisitions, communion and care, affection, and dedication to other members become optional. Personal happiness, rather the selfish satisfaction of pleasures, matters more than what the other person likes. Moreover, various purchases, “gifts”, began to replace, in an attempt to compensate, the time spent in communion with family members, often parents being more concerned with their jobs or their pleasures – hobbies –, than with the evolution and inner needs of the child or the spouse. When the hobby comes between father and son or between spouses, then we are on the horizon of the selfishness that creates the premise of crises. And pleasures and “hobbies” (passionate needs⁷) are multiplied extremely much and rapidly in contemporary society. Professor Francis Fukuyama shows that the needs created by “modern consumerism” are “the fruit of human vanity” and “essentially impossible to satisfy” because they can take infinitely varied forms, the unhappiness of man in an economically developed society coming from the fact that – although he can satisfy some desire easily – yet there are always new desires that cannot be fulfilled⁸.

The reality shows that some desires are artificially created by the consumer society. Professors Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May point out

⁵ Gilles LIPOVETSKY, *Fericirea paradoxală...*, pp. 83-84.

⁶ Gilles LIPOVETSKY, *Fericirea paradoxală...*, p. 111.

⁷ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Captivi în internet*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sophia, București, 2018, pp. 286-290. Larchet shows that new technologies disconnect man from God and connect him to various temptations feeding the passions.

⁸ Francis FUKUYAMA, *Sfârșitul istoriei și ultimul om*, transl. Mihaela Eftimiu, Editura Paideia, București, 1997, p. 80.

that “technology created its own need”, and technological objects did not replace old ways of doing things, “but caused people to do things they didn’t do before”⁹. And to use these objects people must acquire new skills and specializations. Also, to be beneficial to profit, tech items have a limited lifespan and you usually can’t repair them yourself. The generation cycle of phones is getting shorter and shorter, just like any other gadget.

But the mentality started to change long ago and the change is related to the orientation of the economy towards profit, with the establishment of the “spirit of capitalism” – as Max Weber reports – which inaugurated a new “ethos of business people”, where “earning money” became an end in itself and those who did not follow the new spirit could no longer remain in the market¹⁰. The world – the process of religious “disenchantment”¹¹ – began to revolve around business, becoming “a necessary part of life”, even if Weber perceives on the one hand, the irrationality of this way of life in which “Man exists for the sake of his business, and not vice versa”¹².

On the other hand, Zygmunt Bauman shows that modernity is characterized by the “melting of solids”, i.e. by the remodelling of existing patterns, institutions and “framing frames” in any field, the author speaking of “the days of liquid modernity” characterized by permanent change at the “micro” level of social coexistence, resulting in an “individualized, private”¹³ modernity. As things stand, it was the Fordist model – Bauman argues – that reached “every nook and cranny of society”, dominating “the majestic totality of life experience” and promoting industrialization, accumulation, and, above all, regulation¹⁴.

⁹ Zygmunt BAUMAN, Tim MAY, *Gândirea sociologică*, transl. Mihai C. Udma, Editura Humanitas, București, 2008, pp. 211-212.

¹⁰ Max WEBER, *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*, transl. Alexandru Diaconovici, Editura Incitatus, București, 2003, pp. 57-58.

¹¹ Hans G. KIPPENBERG, “Max Weber. Religion and Modernization”, in: Peter B. CLARKE (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of The Sociology and Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, pp. 66-67.

¹² Max WEBER, *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*, p. 60.

¹³ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Modernitatea lichidă*, transl. Diana Grad, Editura Antet, Oradea, 2000, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Modernitatea lichidă*, p. 55.

III. Cohabitation and its Consequences

In family life, one of the effects was the transition from marriage to “cohabitation”, which implies its dissolution “at any time and for any reason, according to necessity and desire”¹⁵. Cohabitation is linked to social and economic conditions, but more importantly, to carnal pleasure, which has become an “accepted” sin in today’s society. Cohabitation occurs mainly among people with weak religious faith. The contribution to the religious decline is due to these cohabitations where the spouses have different cultures and even different religions¹⁶. The conjugal relationship does not only involve physical pleasure and the solution of material problems, as happens in most couples who live in cohabitation, but it also involves self-emptying (to make room for the other inside me), cooperation, and reciprocity.

A minimal analysis of *the consequences of cohabitation* highlights:

a) The increase in cohabitation contributed directly to the increase in the number of single-parent families with children. In Great Britain, for example, currently, one in five children is part of a single-parent family¹⁷. Children, however, to be brought up normally, need a father and a mother. Once the marriage is dissolved, a certain father will give the children to a stepmother, and a mother will impose them on another husband, for whom they will be an unbearable and odious burden. “Dividing children between father and mother further propagate the discord between parents, resulting in broken generations and poisoned lives”¹⁸.

b) Cohabitants who have children are much more likely to separate than those who found a family and have children. An analysis made in

¹⁵ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Modernitatea lichidă*, p. 141.

¹⁶ Don S. BROWNING, Bonnie J. MILLER-MC LEMORE, Pamela D. COUTURE, K. Brynolf LYON and Robert M. FRANKLIN, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 51, 59.

¹⁷ Greg FORSTER, *Cohabitation and Marriage: A Pastoral Response*, Mashall Pickering, London, 1994, p. 48.

¹⁸ Cf. Ilie MOLDOVAN, “În Hristos și în Biserică”. *Adevărul și frumusețea căsătoriei. Teologia iubirii II*, Tipografia Episcopiei Ortodoxe Alba Iulia, p. 179.

Canada at the end of the 90s proves that those unmarried couples who have children would rather not marry anymore, living in cohabitation all their lives¹⁹.

c) A third repercussion of cohabitation is that those children raised in cohabiting couples are much “poorer” spiritually and intellectually, but also materially than children raised in families where there is much more peace, communication, love, and communion.

“Many children (who live in this climate of cohabiting couples) present, often and acutely, mental and social problems – neurotic depression, the feeling of emptiness, indifference to career, indifference to any relationship, attraction to alcohol and narcotics – and a wide variety of violent and deviant behaviors”²⁰.

Also, children from cohabiting couples are much more likely to be victims of abuse than children from organized families. The most unsafe family environments for children are those where the mother lives with a person other than the child’s biological father; this is, in fact, the environment in which most of the children of cohabiting couples live and grow up²¹.

d) People who previously lived in cohabitation are more prone to divorce than people who get married directly from the status of a single person. The motivation for this is that those who have lived together and then marry, divorce faster because they have already spent a lot of time together and outside of marriage, compared to those who marry directly, without having previously cohabited marriage together²².

¹⁹ Zheng WU and T.R. BALAKRISHANN, “Dissolution of Premarital Cohabitation in Canada”, in: «Demography» 32.4 (November 1995), p. 528.

²⁰ Matthaïos IOSAFAT, “Câteva gânduri despre familia modernă și viitorul ei”, in: *Criza familiei*, transl. Șerban Tica, Editura Sophia, București, 2011, p. 16.

²¹ David POPENOE and Barbara DAFOE, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research* (The National Marriage Project), New Jersey, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1999, p. 31.

²² J.D. TEACHMAN and K.A.POLONKO, “Cohabitation and Marital Stability in the United States”, in: *Social Forces*, nr. 69 (1990), pp. 207-210.

Concerning the above, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck shows that the family has become a “zombie” institution, “dead and yet alive”, because it has changed in its very traditional essence, having “melted” the quality of parent or grandparent²³. “Marriage going out of fashion”, Bauman points out, is also a side effect of “the erosion of social space by the aesthetic”, the aesthetic being characterized in the author’s vision by fun, play, and pleasure, which translate into “experimental, fragmented and episodic relationships”²⁴. But the aesthetic must be complemented by moral value, constituting the model of “fulfilled love” characterized not by simple cooperation and occasional respect, but by “respect for the mysteries of the beloved, the cultivation of differences, the suppression of possessive beginnings, the refusal to repress the autonomy of the beloved with the bulldozer of domination”²⁵.

This view is strikingly similar to the Christian perspective on love between spouses and between individuals in general. It contains a reference to the “mystery” of the other, which we can only discover if we renounce ourselves. Christ exalts the natural order of the bond between man and woman in the reality of grace, where the reality of the other is “assumed and transfigured through a holy communion”²⁶, says Professor Adrian Lemeni. The role of the The Church is to constantly call contemporary families to this horizon of living in Christ, outside of which the family becomes meaningless, hence the current tendencies to rethink the family in terms of gender and sexual options, which destroy the very idea of love:

“Another threat against love and life is the issue of gender, which in our opinion represents the abolition of the the essence of our faith, through the definitive destruction of the sacred dimension of the family institution. According to this concept, everyone is

²³ Cf. J.D. TEACHMAN and K.A.POLONKO, “Cohabitation and Marital Stability in the United States”, p. 9.

²⁴ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Epoca postmodernă*, transl. Doina Lică, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 2000, p. 195.

²⁵ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Epoca postmodernă*, p. 197.

²⁶ Adrian LEMENI, *Aspecte apologetice contemporane*, Editura ASAB, București, 2010, p. 149.

free to be in love and hook up with anyone and anything and to decide their sexual behavior”²⁷.

However, the path to Christ is the path through which man can find a fundamental meaning of the family, a meaning that is not paved with easy things, but one that leads to holiness: “The mission of the Church must be done «in the manner of Christ», that is, to lead to holiness without taking into account the steps we are forced to live»²⁸. As Father Gheorghe Petraru testifies the family is a path to deification by relating all aspects to Christ:

“The family is the environment, the horizon of humanization and through the overwhelming presence of Christ’s love invoked in the ritual of the sacrament of the Wedding and experienced in the Christian the spiritual life of the family, the prayer, sacrifice, work, responsibility, and love, it also becomes the path of deification for men and women of the Christian laity”²⁹.

IV. The family – the living mystery of the dual unity in a consumer-oriented society

In Orthodoxy, the family is neither legalistic nor minimalistic, Father Professor Philip LeMasters points out, but all aspects of life are brought before God to be transformed, spiritualized, following the middle path: “Each marriage must participate in the Kingdom of God. It is sin—not the act of conjugal love—that defiles. But, as in our relationship with the other goods of creation, we must not regard marriage as a false god or an end in itself”³⁰. It is an “altar of sacrifice of selfishness and self-centeredness, of our sinful love for ourselves”³¹, says Father Ioan Teșu. Each belongs

²⁷ Gheorghe ISTODOR, *Iubirea creștină și provocările contemporane – perspective misionare*, Editura Sigma, București, 2006, p. 78.

²⁸ Aurel PAVEL, *Studii de teologie misionară și ecumenică*, Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, 2007, p. 32.

²⁹ Gheorghe PETRARU, “Botezul – transfigurare a omului și a familiei”, in: *Familia în societatea contemporană*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2011, pp. 39-40.

³⁰ Philip LEMASTERS, *Valoarea creației lui Dumnezeu. Cum să trăiești ca un creștin ortodox*, transl. Ioan-Lucian Radu, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2018, pp. 77-78.

³¹ Ioan C. TEȘU, *Familia creștină, școală a iubirii și a desăvârșirii*, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2011, p. 183.

to the other. It is truly a mystery in Christ (Ephesians 5, 32). Through the Sacrament of Marriage, man and woman no longer appear as two distinct entities, but as a co-personal³² unit in which the personal character of each spouse is brought to light even more. Being a mystery to himself, every man needs another to discover himself, but intimate communion can only be realized between spouses. Here the grace received reveals one to the other, and love brings them even closer in this intimacy. Each carries the other's secret as his own, and makes his own known to the other:

“Marriage is a true living mystery of duality or dual unity, which begins to be felt and realized from the moment of the union of the two in marriage, or before, but they update their virtualities throughout their lives, without getting bored of each other”³³, says Father Dumitru Stăniloae suggestively.

According to Christian doctrine, the family – representing communal life, full of love – has as its paradigm the communion of love within the Holy Trinity; thus, man could not fulfill himself, could not fill the emptiness of his being except through a person like him, who could stand in front of him, a face with him, with whom he could communicate, thus realizing between the two have their own and original face. “This face is always a cathedral and not a sum of the stones from which the cathedral is built”³⁴. Father John Chryssavgis even wonders how in a consumer-oriented society where the family is also “for mutual consumption”, marriage still enjoys increased attention. He bases the uniqueness of the human person and love, on the trace of the image of God in man: “Marriage still matters, it has meaning because the person has meaning because the greatest wealth of the persons participating in the condition of marriage is worth more than any code of laws, social conventions or biological tastes”³⁵. Because it is

³² Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1978, p. 190.

³³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, p. 193.

³⁴ Ilie MOLDOVAN, “În Hristos și în Biserică”. *Iubirea, taina căsătoriei. Teologia iubirii I*, Tipografia Episcopiei Ortodoxe Alba Iulia, p. 23.

³⁵ John CHRYSYSSAVGIS, *Dragoste, sexualitate și Taina Cununiei*, transl. Ștefan Voronca, Editura Egumenița, Galați, 2017, p. 27.

a mystery of God planted in creation, for which all people feel a call, but which is perfected in the Church.

Although one might think that the changes related to family life are a more recent product of the computerized society of the last 30 years, sociologist Francis Fukuyama shows that they began in the middle of the 20th century when the industry became an indispensable component of society. The changes refer to the increase in criminality, social disorder, the decline of kinship relations, the decrease in fertility, the increased divorce rate, the large number of children born out of wedlock, and the decrease in trust in people, and in institutions³⁶. Among other things, we see that the technology and rationalization of work that underpinned industrialization also led to the “disintegration of the extended family”³⁷, today’s high-performing technological era continues the “work” of dividing, disintegrating, melting, and reshaping, proposing permanently new family models and more. The same professor Fukuyama calls the family “the old man of the 21st century” because of the free and non-conformist lifestyle, selfishness, and material desires, people end up going through two or three divorces, but many people who go through such situations end up spending the last years of their lives alone, or at best visited by a child. The author wants to highlight the “superficial connection” with these relatives, where relations will be “easily detached” due to the supposed sharing and division of material goods or custody of children. Even the connection through social networks becomes a disadvantage because, in the event of settling in an asylum, they cannot renew and reshape their being, because the care shown on the Internet has no place in personal visits and meetings – for which few friends will allocate time –, and the end of life will occur in “incredible loneliness”³⁸.

Loneliness will certainly be a big problem of the future, in addition to the fact that Fukuyama argues, declining fertility or the “refusal to reproduce” – characteristic of economically developed countries – will create situations of “social instability and violent reactions”, understood as a tension between the native population and immigrants or through the

³⁶ Francis FUKUYAMA, *Marea Ruptură. Natura umană și refacerea ordinii sociale*, transl. Liana V. Alecu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011, pp. 12-13.

³⁷ Francis FUKUYAMA, *Sfârșitul istoriei și ultimul om*, p. 85.

³⁸ Francis FUKUYAMA, *Marea Ruptură*, p. 142-143.

conflict between generations³⁹. “The symptom of loneliness experienced in the middle of the crowd”⁴⁰ characterizes today’s society, Adrian Lemeni points out. One reason is also, the fact that time is “confiscated by selfishness”, leading to the inability to enjoy or suffer with another, time as a gift of God is replaced by “egocentric time”, the thirst for infinity with the “finiteness of passions”⁴¹.

American professors Jan E. Dizard and Howard Gadlin introduce the phrase “minimal family”, describing the challenges that contemporary man accepts within the family from the desire to satisfy individualistic pleasures. Dizard and Gadlin shows that familism understood as a “mutual sense of commitment, sharing, cooperation, and intimacy”⁴² has been seriously transformed by the consumer society, where the accumulation of goods and spending are basic pillars of self-worth and material well-being⁴³. Anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu shows that the “minimal family” that Dizard and Gadlin talk about is a fruit of individualism imposed on different political, sociological and economic paths such as the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the French Revolution, the industrial revolution etc.⁴⁴ Thus, the child is subjected to a process of “disaffiliation” to be able to realize himself and not depend on a possible inheritance, and childhood is dedicated to the “acquisition” of skills and competencies to deal with industrial work. The cost of education being high, the number of children was reduced, along with the development of the mentality that every child must have equal chances to succeed. Professor Mihăilescu illustrates very well the thinking of Dizard and Gadlin regarding the way of influencing the organization of the family by a consumerist society:

³⁹ Francis FUKUYAMA, *Marea Ruptură*, pp. 135- 136. The author shows that 75% of the total number of houses in Oslo (Norway) are inhabited by single people.

⁴⁰ Adrian LEMENI, “Sensul eshatologic al timpului”, in: Adrian LEMENI, Adrian Sorin MIHALACHE, (coord.), *Viață și conștiință în orizontul temporalității*, Editura Basilica, Editura Universității „Al.I. Cuza” din Iași, Editura Universității din București, 2015, p. 21.

⁴¹ Adrian LEMENI, “Sensul eshatologic al timpului”, p. 22.

⁴² Jan E. DIZARD, Howard GADLIN, *The Minimal Family*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1990, p. 6.

⁴³ Jan E. DIZARD, Howard GADLIN, *The Minimal Family*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ Vintilă MIHĂILESCU, “Familia minimală”, in: *Dilema Veche*, nr. 579, 15-25 martie 2015, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/editoriale-si-opinii/familia-minimala-594038.html>, accessed on May the 12th 2023.

“The minimization of the family goes even further, on somewhat different paths, generically called «postmodernity». The separation of reproductive sexuality through contraceptive means and the promotion of «protected sex» liberalizes couple relationships, and removes them from the control of society and allows them to invest their partners in hedonism. Consensual unions take the place of formal marriages, the age of marriage is postponed, the duration of couples is reduced, the divorce rate increases, the number of single-parent families also increase and of the three children of bourgeois conjugal love, only the project of a single «child of desire» remains”⁴⁵.

V. Conclusions

We can safely say that for every aspect of family life, there is a serious threat in this consumer-oriented world. Relationships are of poor quality because individual pleasure is sought and not the joy of communion. Intimacy is streamlined for pleasure and not for discovering and understanding the other. The small number of children is justified not so much by the fact that there are no material resources for growth and education or educational conditions, but by the necessary sacrifices that involve a renunciation of one’s comfort, one’s pleasures. Even if these pleasures are not essential and complete, it is often easier to stay comfortable and without concern for the other. You can dedicate yourself to your career or work, you can travel or you can enjoy going out with friends. The contemporary mentality does not envisage sacrifice for another as a part of life. The perception of life has changed so much that the consumerist ideology no longer regards man as a citizen, but as a simple consumer, and political factors focus only on providing resources for consumption. The meaning of life is given by what we possess. Consumption thus motivates only an individualistic sacrifice. You can sacrifice yourself by working so that you can afford to consume. Otherwise, it makes no sense according to contemporary beliefs.

⁴⁵ Vintilă MIHĂILESCU, “Familia minimală”.