

The Reception of “Familiaris Consortio” in the Local Churches in Middle East, with Special Attention to the Family as Subject of Evangelization

Background: Historical road and characteristics of the family in the Middle East.

The Heritage and the family culture in the Middle East have a long history; each period contributed differently to the characteristics of the family.

First of all: The families in the Middle East had a strong life of prayer in the community and in their houses.

I will demonstrate this by using the story of the pilgrimage of the Holy family of Nazareth to Jerusalem at Passover(Luke 2: 41- 52).

“His parents went every year to Jerusalem at Passover...” Luke 2: 41.

They had maintained and celebrated each year the feasts as families.

Also many liturgies were served by families, therefore homes would be considered as prayer places.

Second : families used practical love relations and communication

In the same story, when Joseph and Mary lost young Jesus, they did not blame each other, but used a practical solution orientated with love, they returned to Jerusalem and looked for him for three days. When they found him, they did not shout, curse or hit him, Mary expressed their feelings with much love by” I statements”:*“ See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you”*, Jesus did not answer with rebel against them but expressed his needs *“I must be in my Father's house”*

Third: Taking care of members of the family who had special needs. In the gospel it is mentioned that while Jesus on the cross (John 19:25 - 27) " *seeing his mother..*" he thought about her and tried to find a solution not to keep her alone, so he said to John "*this is your mother*"

Forth: Taking care of the others in the community. " *And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.*"

The byzantine period added two effects on the families in the Middle East:

First is that **the church began making long and short term catechism**, as did the bishop Cyril of Jerusalem in his mystagogical catechesis

The other is **recruiting members of families as clergy and monks**. The deserts of the East became cities of prayer and contemplation.

Another main characteristic is that **families in the Middle East have always been persecuted throughout history**.

It all started with the persecution of Jesus himself and his disciples.

From the seventh century till today Christian families have lived under the Islamic era.

Christians were at that time considered" **Thimma**"-meaning second class citizens with limiting rules and having persecutions from time to time according to the ruler policy. In addition having to pay the "**Jizya**"- a special tax the Christian families had in order to be allowed to remain Christians.

In the Ottoman period, 15th - 19th century, Christian families were influenced in two more aspects. The first the "Jizya" was changed to the "**Millet**" system in which the religious hierarchy were asked to be tax collectors from their community and representing their community's to

Ottoman authorities. Thus the people's point of view of **the clergy was changed from men of God to socio-economical councils.**

The other influence was made by the **missionaries** from the west, who came to the Middle East, built educational, health and religious institutes which benefit the people, but at the same time attracted Christians to the missionaries' orders, contributing to the divisions in the churches in the Middle East, Catholic, Greek Catholic and Coptic Catholic; also Anglicans and protestant movements formed their sects . So the body of Christ was split by the name of Christ. **The families stopped being loyal to the church and its tradition, but to the sects, moved by personal benefits.**

In the twentieth century: **Secularism and individualism** have entered the Middle East. Some families became **ignorant and forgot who they are and lost the Christian teachings and values**

The second Vatican council and “Familiaris Consortio” :

In The second Vatican council, the Eastern hierarchies of the East were asked a special thing, to reflect about the church issues and how they are supposed to live their faith. The Eastern catholic churches succeeded in the mission and contributed to the council by giving a genuine vision supported by Eastern tradition.

In 1981 his Holiness Pope John Paul II wrote the Apostolic Exhortation “*Familiaris Consortio*” . The Apostolic Exhortation is a master piece or new patristic writing, with challenges about the family. It includes broad band aspects of the family life. It returned to the gospel and Holy family of Nazareth as the model of Christian family, presented patristic view of the family with great quotations from the Fathers of the Church

in the East and West. Then the Exhortation addressed different aspects of the modern family issues and gave strategies how to deal with them, part of the problem seemed so crucial and spread in our families others are not distributed yet in our communities.

The reception of the Catholic Churches in the Middle East to “Familiaris Consortio” and mainly to catechism of the family was and still is continuing in several levels:

First: Translating the document to Arabic: Bishop N. Sfeir- Later became the patriarch of the Maronite church- has translated the document to Arabic. And was published by Catholic Information Center in Lebanon.

Second: The Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East:

1. In 1994 has studied the issue of the family and reaffirmed according to the “*Familiaris Consortio*” that “the family is the nucleus of the Church, without this” home church” the collective church cannot exist”.

The council recommended establishing Episcopal Family Committees. Their mission is to deal with the family issues.

2. In 2003 the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs has chosen to his 13th meeting the issue of the family, and published a pastoral letter called “ *the Family is the Responsibility of the Church and the State*”. It is based mainly on “*Familiaris Consortio*” and quote several times from it.

The document has four chapters, **the first chapter** describes the difficulties that face the families in the East, as free sexual

relation, cohabitation without marriage and cohabitation according to civil laws only (the same subjects were dealt with in the “F.C.”). Families are exposed to Antifamily values in the media and bio-ethical issues, and that many families do not have religious education.

Second chapter: Discusses the complications caused by the State law that Christian families face, due to living in states with Islamic law.

Third chapter: Discusses the solutions. It adopts from the Apostolic Exhortation, the necessity to create and support centers to prepare couples for marriage. The Preparation has to be divided into three areas: remote, proximate, and immediate, it requires making the immediate preparation obligatory. It also presents the issues that have to be dealt with in the preparation, exactly as written in “F.C.”.

Other recommendation is to establish centers for listening and family counseling.

Forth chapter: Deals with practical issues and responsibilities in implementation of the previous recommendations. Clarifying the duties of the bishops and the duties of the parish priests

It recommends also to use the facilities of John the 23rd center for the families and to open branches of the center in the East.

Third: Country Level

A: In Labanon

In Lebanon, the Episcopal Committee for Family and Life was established in 1996, under the supervision of the Catholic Bishops and

Patriarchs in Lebanon. Its former head was Bishop Bechara Rai who is now the new Maronite Patriarch. The present head is Bishop Andari.

The Episcopal Committee worked to develop gradually and extend the pastorality of the family, as follows:-

- Development of regulations and laws necessary for the Committee's work.
- Circulating the establishment of the Family Committee in every diocese.
- Founding centers for marriage preparations in dioceses.
- Creating a unified program and topics for the sessions of marriage preparation.
- Establishing family groups in the dioceses and writing a directory for them - "the directory of family groups".
- Forming several centers to counsel and listen to married couples and families, there are currently in Lebanon five centers.
- Initiate seminars and conferences on topics related to the family.
- Translation and printing books in Arabic as the Lexicon of the family, preparation and printing of "family prayer" book and publishing" the magazine of the family".

The writings and the instructions are based mainly on the Apostolic Exhortation, for example "the directory of family groups" has 17 references, 13 references are from "Familiaris Consortio" .

B: In Syria

The Catholic Bishops in Syria established lately, Episcopal committee for the family. The head of the committee is Bishop Nassar. The committee cooperates with different family groups that make catechism for the families and marriage preparations.

C: In Israel Jordan and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza)

The Council of Catholic Bishops in the Holy Land (which include Israel Jordan and Palestine (west bank and Gaza)) , established the Synod of the Holy Land. It was the first serious clergy- laity cooperation, its purpose was to reflect on the pastoral issues of the Holy Land, discuss them and give recommendations. The *"Familiaris Consortio"* was one of the main references of the Synod. The conclusion of the Synod was "The pastoral plan of the Holy Land". It got the approval of his Holiness Pope John Paul II when he visited the holy land in 2000.

In the pastoral plan, the subjects that were discussed which are related to the family are the following:

- The family in the community.
- Needs and changes of the families.
- Marriage as sacrament.
- The life of the Christian family.
- Christian family in church and society.
- Pastoral family work.
- Preparation for marriage.

- Celebrating marriage and continuity after marriage.

In it there are at least 16 references from “*Familiaris Consortio*”.

Then the council of catholic bishops established “**the Catholic Pastoral Committee**” its purpose is to study the SWOTs – strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats- of the subjects of the pastoral plan and give recommendations for applications and implementations in the dioceses and parishes.

From the subjects that have been dealt with are

- The family subject of catechism
- Preparing for marriage
- Writing and Publishing “family prayer book”

Episcopal family committee:

The committee was established by the bishops of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land. Its Head is Bishop P. Sayah now the vicar general of the Maronite Patriarch.

It is deals with:

- Marriage preparation issues.
- Spreading pastoral and ecclesiastical writings related to the family
- Creating listening and counseling centers.
- Establishing family committees and groups in the parishes

D: In Iraq

There is a committee for the family in Iraq. The bishop the head of the committee was martyred. Christians in Iraq are very afraid about their physical existence. They are suffering as Christians from hard persecution with intention to evacuate them from their homeland.

Obstacles in reception “*Familiaris Consortio*”

Familiaris Consortio is a driving force in the catechism of the families in the Middle East. Sometimes its application on the level of dioceses and parishes has obstacles from bishops, priests or laity

- Some bishops would rather handle other issues than the families, and don't see this subject as a main priority.
- In other places bishops had good intentions, but some priests in the parishes have either different agenda, or they do not know how to grasp the Royal priesthood of the Laity with its opportunities.
- Sometimes clergy – priests and bishops- prefer the way “do it yourself” and not team work.
- Another obstacle in reception “*F. C.*” , is the Cultural way of thinking from the laity: What can the church do for me, i.e. How can I benefit from the church.

Conclusion:

The Apostolic Exhortation: *Familiaris Consortio* has changed the paradigm of the catechism of the family in the Middle East. Since Christianity is a way of life, there is a need to continue to convert the great sentences of *Familiaris Consortio*, into way of life in the Middle East.

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Thank you

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