

# Family Virtues and Human Dignity

## Introduction

According to recent researches for the Americans<sup>1</sup> the most typical representation of a family involves three criteria: first, heterosexuality, second, the presence of marriage, and third, the presence of children.<sup>2</sup> However, this understanding of family, often called a 'traditional' or 'nuclear' family, is no longer the only one or the predominant model. Societies across the world<sup>3</sup> are populated by families comprising of single parents (usually mothers) with children, parents without children, two cohabiting partners, partners with adopted children... There are of course gay and lesbian families, too. Could any or all of these models be called families, after all?

More than that, the world is undergoing huge changes: the globe we live on is shrinking due to the high mobility of people and goods and the increasing availability of information; new markets are opening up; various cultures encounter each other and their values and traditions get mingled in unprecedented ways... It is no wonder then that some are desperate to take hold of some reference point, to cling to some element of the 'old' which would provide stability and lend support in the face of the 'new' that can be so merciless in its questioning of the 'traditional' ways.

## 1. Statement of the problem: 'Traditional family values' in danger

We should not be surprised, therefore, by the fact that in different parts of the world a call for a recovery of 'traditional family values' can be heard. Consider an example from my own country, Croatia.

### 1.1 Holidays as occasions to keep traditional family values

During a process involving bloodshed, ethnic enmity and serious calamities, Croatia regained its independence at the beginning of the 1990s. The overthrowing of communism and the opportunity to rediscover national identity for most Croatians carried the meaning of freedom to

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<sup>1</sup> A high proportion of resources used in this paper come from a Northern American context, but I believe a striking resemblance can be noticed throughout the Western world, including my country of Croatia.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron Lee, *Beyond Family Values: A Call to Christian Virtue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 26-43.

<sup>3</sup> Not to the same extent, however. The Western world has been much more influenced by changes in the experience and understanding of family. However, with the advancement of globalisation, things are more likely to change in even the most remote parts of the world.

openly fashion their private and public lives according to patterns that have been suppressed for a long time. These patterns, reflected in tradition and culture, are intimately related to the Catholic Church to which a great majority of Croatians belong. As a result of the war, this connection grew even stronger as the enemies—the Serbs—were Orthodox. Religious affiliation was used, on both sides, as a vehicle of differentiating from the enemy and a fuel for nourishing nationalism.

Even before the war was over, Croatian society began its transformation into a capitalist society with a market economy. The new and the old came together in a peculiar way. But very soon the first objections were formulated against the overriding of 'traditional values'. As it turned out, the family was considered to be especially endangered, with individualism and other features 'imported' from the West enabling younger generations to search for the meaning of life in other quarters.

To recover these 'family values', some voices within the Catholic Church began to associate the terminology of family values with the celebrations of Easter and Christmas.<sup>4</sup> Year after year, an invitation is repeated to spend these holidays within 'the family circle', to cherish 'real family values'.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, a significant segment of secular society began to echo this chorus. Thus, at these two points during a year, there is a general consensus on the ultimate importance of the family.

Although I am a Christian, a family member, a father of two children, and a husband, this does not seem right to me! Let me explain my doubts regarding the legitimacy of this approach. If Christmas is supposed to remind me of the value that the family is supposed to be for me, and if I am to spend it strictly within my family, what is the good news of Christmas for those without a family – orphans, strangers, members of dysfunctional families? Are they second-rate citizens, or, even worse, second-rate believers? Are family values something to be preserved and cherished only within the secure boundaries of our families? What do I, in this way, communicate to my children about the relationship of family and outer reality?

This piece of personal experience underlines a more general trend, but in order to acquire a better understanding of the battle that is going on over family values, we need to turn our attention to shifts in contemporary culture.

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<sup>4</sup> These religious holidays are especially convenient as Croatians have always celebrated them, even during the Communist time.

<sup>5</sup> One would not hear this so often within non-Catholic Christian churches, but the practices within their families during holidays resemble the prevailing cultural trend.

## 1.2 Influence of shifts in contemporary culture

The very fact that there is so much discussion on family values reveals that they ‘... are like the air we breathe: we depend on them, but they go unnoticed until disturbed’.<sup>6</sup> Yet what has disturbed them?

One of the factors could be identified as ‘social saturation’, to use the term coined by Kenneth Gergen, which takes place when a multitude of images and values by means of advanced technologies bombards the family (or individual).<sup>7</sup> Faced with such a manifold offer of values, people tend to develop various interests. However, they usually change them frequently, simply because ‘saturation’ is an ongoing and irresistible process. Consequently, relationships are based on a shallow, ever-shifting ground of common interest. Within this kind of setting, family members are very rarely able to relate on the basis of shared values.

In addition, the understanding of the family role tends to be influenced by security issues. To put it simply, the world is becoming a more and more dangerous place. Even before the recent wake of international terrorism, there was a growing feeling of insecurity caused by the increase of violence, drug abuse, financial instability, unemployment, etc. Within such setting, there is a higher probability of conceiving the family as something that must be protected and something that protects its members from the evil coming from the outside.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, although the consumerist mentality is not a novelty in the Western world, it has nevertheless gained a more prominent role than ever. Proof of this is the level of manipulation by which the market governs our desires. David Matzko McCarthy spells it out: ‘The market requires that our desires be nomadic, that our longings never find a resting place. In the market, our experiences of things and people are considered ideal when they conjure up more desire, and drive us incessantly onward to new things.’<sup>9</sup>

Certainly not the last shift, but among the most notable ones, is the result of the separation of church and state. Earlier, the ‘interests’ of these two within Christendom very often overlapped significantly, if not completely. It is not so anymore; nowadays serious differences in opinion

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<sup>6</sup> Lee, *Beyond Family Values*, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-85.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in his analysis of depictions of family in three films (*Dick Tracy*, *Terminator 2* and *Interview with the Vampire*), Gerard Loughlin concludes that in today’s world, the family is not anymore perceived as a valid alternative to the society overwhelmed by fear – all it can be is ‘a barricade against the wider terror’, Gerard Loughlin, ‘The Want of Family in Postmodernity’, in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 313.

<sup>9</sup> D.M. McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 243.

between the church and the state arise concerning the function and the nature of certain social realities. Rodney Clapp suggests that the family's shape and destiny could well be one of those points of disagreement.<sup>10</sup>

There is no doubt that these shifts can disturb practically any traditional notion, but before we turn to further exploration of what really is at stake here and what constitutes a problem for the Christian vision of family, let me comment briefly on the issue of human dignity.

### 1.3 Human dignity under pressure

The aforementioned influences, among other factors, pose a threat to human dignity. Capitalism as an economic system is founded on the dissatisfaction of people because it drives people to feel incomplete with the things they already possess, and nudges them to search for fulfilment in new purchases.<sup>11</sup> This generation of the feeling that final happiness is just 'one-more-thing-to-be-bought' away makes people prone to making comparisons with others (neighbours, relatives, colleagues...). The struggle is condemned to failure since we always compare ourselves to those who apparently have more.

Being reduced to a small part of the great machine of consumerism, the overwhelming impression that the family has to be defended at all cost, and the reality of weak relationships within the very family one is to protect, diminishes the dignity of the individual and the family because it simply undercuts the potential of each human being to develop and discover all of his/her gifts within the family setting. The core of this paper's thesis is this: Christian family virtues have a potential to restore and enhance human dignity. That proposal will receive a more detailed treatment under Section 3.

## 2. Re-statement of the problem: Misunderstanding of the role of the family

The next step is to determine the Christian understanding of family. However, this investigation will prove authentic only if its evidence can help us to decide whether surrounding culture exercises its formative influence on Christian values.<sup>12</sup> This will help to give us a clearer perception of today and the reason for hope for a better tomorrow.

<sup>10</sup> Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional Roles and Modern Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Julie Hanlon Rubio, 'Does family conflict with community?' in *Theological Studies* 58 no. 4 (December 1997), p. 613.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, *Beyond Family Values*, p. 43. Correlative to this would be 'the recovery of habits of the mind that give us skills to understand the world in which we live on our own terms and not on the world's terms'.

## 2.1 Origin and nature of the public-private dichotomy

In the 'traditional family', the roles are neatly differentiated. The husband is in charge of financially providing for the family; the wife is to take care of the children and household. The husband is to face the cruel and corrupted world outside, while the primary task of the wife is to nurture the family in order to create a safe emotional and spiritual 'haven' from the outside world. Clapp has done an excellent analysis of 'traditional family' in American history and here are some of his findings. First of all, there are striking similarities between the bourgeois family of the nineteenth century and the 'traditional family'.<sup>13</sup> Second, the Industrial Revolution proved to be a turning point in the role of the family. It ceased to be a wider, production-oriented household and turned into a much smaller unit which rendered most of its previous responsibilities to the state or society.<sup>14</sup> Thus the public-private division was introduced and began to be used as a means of further specialisation of roles. As a contrast, Lee presents a picture of the Puritan notion of family which functioned as a household with a highly social character based on a wider network of kin relationships and economic considerations.<sup>15</sup>

Janet Fishburn points to the foundational importance of the family during the Victorian era (1830-1913) for the existence and stability of entire civilisation.<sup>16</sup> During that period, she argues, American Protestants made the mistake of confusing the hope of christianising America with the Christian faith itself. The result was not a civilisation becoming Christian, but a domestication of Protestant churches.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, supposedly Christian family values actually first and foremost served as a guarantee of social unity and progress.

However, more recently the withdrawal into the safety of the home and the desire to preserve Christian ethical values came as a result of a wider dichotomy between personal and social spheres. In its turn, it also helped to reinforce and reaffirm this very dichotomy. As a result, the family began to occupy only the realm of privacy and lost most of its social dimension and impact.

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Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 48, quoted in Lee, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> See Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, pp. 30-34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-57.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, *Beyond Family Values*, pp. 50-55.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family: A New Vision for the Household of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) quoted in Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family*, p. 12.

All of this provides a good argument for claiming that the 'traditional family' is not a 'biblical' model of family – a model that could be directly transferred from any period of Israel's or church history. Rather, it has its roots in a much more recent history. Family values advocated by supporters of the 'traditional family' are much more historically and socially conditioned than they are usually ready to admit. This fact may also serve to turn our attention to what may be the *real* problem in the contemporary discussion of the role of the family. Cameron Lee puts it this way: '... the crisis of the family is less about the trials and tribulation of individual families, or even the form the family takes, than about the steadily shrinking range of social contexts that call forth our capacities to cooperate, love and make sacrifices for one another'.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 The consumerist mentality

The change brought about by the Industrial Revolution not only narrowed down the scope of the family but also planted a seed of profound change in relationships within the family. Abandonment of its productive activities led the family to accept the task of the consumption of goods produced by the wider society. Gradually this turned all family relationships into product-oriented relationships.<sup>19</sup> Since today every individual is considered to be a consumer, the market is doing its best to manipulate the individual with every imaginable value, including those related to the family!

McCarthy illustrates this with the idea of securing adequate parental care, love and atmosphere in the home: 'Growth capitalism provides ever-increasing standards for good parents ... Affection, for all classes, carries a financial burden; monetary resources are the making of harmony at home.'<sup>20</sup> To follow McCarthy further, we would need to concede that in families reinforced by the consumerist mentality, the children are more often than not reduced to being *objects of investment* (be it financial resources, energy, time, feelings).<sup>21</sup> Being a parent myself, I reluctantly must admit that there is a strong ring of truth in this statement.

Consumer mentality pushes society towards selfishness and egocentricity, and its impact is often too strong for the family to resist. Moreover, in terms of relating to the social sphere, consumerism manages to establish the consumption of goods as family's *crucial* contribution to public life.<sup>22</sup> Since supporters of 'traditional family values' would not agree

<sup>18</sup> Lee, *Beyond Family Values*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

that their family ideal is based on its function of consumption, it is worthwhile to explore this public-private relation a little further.

### 2.3 The family and its social role

Of course, the picture of the family portrayed so far is not meant to depict an entirely self-sufficient, independent unit. However, what this description does suggest is that communication with the world outside is rather practical in its nature and tends to happen through paying for professional services, earning wages and consuming goods. John Kavanaugh believes that it is the last of these three that isolates people from their neighbours and family and makes it possible for them not to hear the cries of the poor.<sup>23</sup> McCarthy is on the same track when taking note that in terms of social economy, 'the closed home is inclined to limit gift-giving not because giving is a burden, but because *receiving is*' (italics mine).<sup>24</sup> The inner logic is clear: receiving is dangerous as it entails a sort of social exchange not based on financial terms and therefore may pose a threat to firmly defined boundaries of the family nucleus. Thus it is safer not to perceive the needs of others, because then giving is unnecessary and receiving is not likely to occur.

In his analysis of the historical detachment of family from the public arena, Clapp first concludes that the only purpose left was the intimacy and nurture of 'private' relationships which led to trivialisation of the private, and then goes on to suggest that '...perhaps not so coincidentally, Christian faith was also removed from the public realm and trivialized'.<sup>25</sup> The correctness of this last point may be more or less visible depending on the context of a particular society and culture. What remains beyond doubt, however, is this: if the struggle over traditional family values is inspired by the hopes that the institution of the family is the last (or one of the last) resorts the church has for restoring basic structures of society, then the family's mission is doomed to a disastrous failure. The reason is tangible: at present the state of the family's potential for achieving social change is minimal. On the contrary, as McCarthy rightly observes, the family '... functions as a mediating institution, which conveys both the aims of government to the individual and the participation of individuals in projects of the state'.<sup>26</sup> Instead of questioning and transforming a society that suffers from moral decay, the 'traditional' family only sustains the current social order.

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<sup>23</sup> John Kavanaugh, *Following the Christ in a Consumer Society* (rev. ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), p. 60 quoted in Rubio, 'Does family conflict with community?', p. 614.

<sup>24</sup> McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, p. 68.

Before we start looking for an alternative, another important dilemma remains to be settled by answering the following questions: How is the church related to the role of the family? Should the church lend her strengths and ministries in support of the family's grand mission of transformation of society? Should the church's commitment to family be equal to commitment to the Gospel?

## 2.4 The family and the church

In her judgement on American – presumably Protestant – churches, Fishburn maintains that within the communities family-related needs occupied such a central position that churches themselves became inwardly oriented.<sup>27</sup> This is a stark warning: misplaced expectations regarding family can even turn the church into a mere instrument of providing spiritual 'goods' to the family whose role then becomes that of 'religious consumer'.<sup>28</sup> The consequences of this for the understanding of the church's mission to the world could be destructive. It is valid, therefore, to re-examine how our commitments to the family correspond to the story of the Gospels and the early Church.

Even a casual reader of the Evangelists' accounts of Jesus' life will discover that he certainly held the family in high esteem. Did not he affirm marriage (Mt 10:21-22; 34; 37), bless the children (Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17), and assign a solemn role to child-caring (Mk 9:37)? Yes, but he also pointed to the temporal nature of family bonds (Mt 22.23-30; Lk 9:59-62), and actually redefined the family (Mk 3:31-35) after the criterion of *following himself*. This new institution was based on loyalty and obedience to God above all biological bonds or other ties. Clapp again uses a powerful imagery: 'Now for those who follow Jesus, the critical blood, the blood that most significantly determines their identity and character, is not the blood of the biological family. It is the blood of the Lamb.'<sup>29</sup>

What about the rest of the New Testament? The famous 'household rules' are often used in affirming 'traditional family values'. Fishburn argues, nonetheless, that they are only sketching some general instructions on the nature of relationships based on equality in Christ.<sup>30</sup> The socio-historical researches show that household codes of other cultures would usually address only the male head of the family,<sup>31</sup> which makes the NT

<sup>27</sup> Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family*, p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, *Beyond Family Values*, p. 230.

<sup>29</sup> Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, p. 78. He then proceeds, in pp.79-81, to show how even Mary was first called to be a disciple, and only then his mother.

<sup>30</sup> Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family*, p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Osiek, 'The New Testament and the Family' (pp. 1-9 in *The Family*, Concilium 1995/4. Edited by Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 8. Osiek also maintains that



codes an exception that contributes to the human dignity of all family members *and* reveals a belonging to a new family tied by a kinship of Spirit. As for the form of the family, there are some accounts where entire households accepted baptism (Acts 11:14, 16:15, 16:33, 18:8, 1 Cor 1:16) – this confirms a social reality of a household as a basic social unit and counters our notion of both ‘traditional family’ and personal responsibility to answer the call of God. Generally, I believe, it can be reasonably argued that while the NT affirms the value of family (most probably in its socially conditioned form of that time), it nevertheless points to a higher Christian reality that supersedes the family.

Various voices from within Christian tradition speak in favour of the church’s predominance over the family. Discussing the teachings of John Chrysostom, Vigen Guroian comments that the Christian family is invited first of all to the Kingdom of God and a certain discipline is needed to accomplish that.<sup>32</sup> Pondering over the social teaching of the Catholic Church, McCarthy concludes that Pope John Paul II understood the role of the family to be fulfilled through ‘practices of discipleship and church’.<sup>33</sup> As Clapp would argue, the church is God’s pivotal institution, social agent and vehicle of salvation on the earth. As such, the church is at the same time the authentic hope for the family because ‘the service to the kingdom provides the center and the sense of wholeness we otherwise lack. It crosses public-private lines and unites these supposedly separate worlds.’<sup>34</sup>

Christians have often been tempted to locate the enemy outside their camp. The battle over family values is not an exception. However, the New Testament writers show little or no interest in blaming political or social systems for the evil around them. Rather, they focus on the responsibility of the church and the believers’ day-to-day dealings in the course of their ordinary life. This is why the final section of this paper will deal with the transformation of the problem, with some suggestions for families seeking the Kingdom.

### **3. Transformation of the problem: Christian family virtues in the restoration of human dignity**

My hope is that the reader was able to conclude that ‘traditional family’ values are a rather void concept, emptied of significant content, and that the

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instruction to children is actually addressing *adult* children in order to make sure their elderly (widowed) mothers are looked after.

<sup>32</sup>Vigen Guroian, *Ethics after Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 135.

<sup>33</sup>McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup>Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, p. 168.

cry for their preservation actually represents little more than an impotency in finding the true role of the family in the contemporary setting.<sup>35</sup> Instead of perceiving this situation as a crisis, I suggest it should be considered as an opportunity for a major change. Families have a mission to complete!<sup>36</sup> But to be able to successfully accomplish it, I propose that distinctively Christian virtues should be developed and embodied.<sup>37</sup> Due to limits on space, here I will focus on two of them.

### 3.1. The family and the virtue of hospitality

An opening remark must be made: to become hospitable is a dangerous change! For many of us, to create overtures in the tight boundaries of our families may awaken fears of the unknown. 'If we let down our guard', says McCarthy, 'neighbors will be entering our homes as though they belong there'.<sup>38</sup> But we must be reminded that '... to be virtuous necessarily means we must take the risk of facing trouble and dangers that might otherwise be unrecognized'.<sup>39</sup> This adventurous character of hospitality will not be experienced if the practice is reduced to an occasional providing of a meal or overnight stay for our friends. What, then, is the family's virtue of hospitality all about?

To use Miroslav Volf's metaphor, it is about an 'embrace'.<sup>40</sup> Instead of 'excluding' others who do not 'belong' to our family and therefore pose a threat to our emotional haven, we should open up in willingness to accept those who are different. The biblical evidence for welcoming the strangers is compelling. Clapp lists examples of inclusion of 'strangers' in Israel's society (Judg 17:12);<sup>41</sup> of Abraham receiving promise of a son when practising hospitality to strangers (Gen 18); of Paul admonishing Romans

<sup>35</sup> Or in Stanley Hauerwas' words, '...one of the reasons we so extol the value of the family is because we are so unsure of its worth. We attempt to substitute rhetoric for substance and are thus unable to deal with the obvious shortcomings of the institution.' *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> In the words of Pope John Paul II, the family is '...called to offer everyone a witness of generous and disinterested dedication to social matters through a "preferential option" for the poor and disadvantaged.' *Familiaris consortio* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), no. 47, quoted in Rubio, 'Does family conflict with community?', p. 601, and Clapp envisions the family as a 'mission base' in *Families at the Crossroads*, pp. 161ff.

<sup>37</sup> The term 'virtues' obviously draws on the McIntyreian concept and replaces the language of values, but because of the limits of this paper I have no space to expound on the relevance of his work and proposals for Christian ethics. However, a useful guide can be found in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, eds. Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), esp. ch. 3. Although Volf uses 'embrace' primarily as a metaphor for '... the dynamic relationship between the self and the other that embrace symbolizes and enacts', I believe it can be descriptive of family and its relations to its 'other'.

<sup>41</sup> Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, pp. 34-9.

to extend 'hospitality to strangers' (Rom 12:13 NRSV); of hospitality as the necessary trait of the Christian widow (1 Tim 5:10); and of a possibility that being hospitable toward strangers we may open up our homes for the Lord's angels (Heb 13:2)!

In a multicultural and multireligious world, embracing hospitality could be a Christian virtue that surpasses and excels politically correct tolerance. Again, this is not a comfortable and romantic task because the strangeness of others may question borders we have erected and challenge our way of life.<sup>42</sup> The existence of the poor can be disturbing for churches in consumerist cultures, for it questions the validity of the understanding of family as a shelter or fortress of privacy which serves to protect its members from the evils of the public realm. To protect itself, the family has to rely on consumption of goods unavailable to the poor and in so doing perpetuates its practices of privilege. It is then easy to see why charity work tackling the consequences of this injustice is mostly organised and achieved through para-church agencies. Family once again stays on the safe side of the private-public gap, and Christians can calm their conscience by giving money to charities and continue to feel safe and morally upright within their families.

The virtue of hospitality – whether it means embracing strangers who do not share our worldview, or taking care of children who are newcomers in this world, or allowing the poor to have a share in our fellowship – always acknowledges our dependence, our refusal to bow down before the cultural idol of independence and self-sufficiency. This retrieval of the comprehensive mutual dependence of all people may be something theology could offer to rebuild human dignity,<sup>43</sup> but at the same time it may help the church to decide to become, not a subculture, but an alternative culture with 'a preference for being rather than having'.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.2. The family and the virtue of presence<sup>45</sup>

There is another plane at which the Christian family, and marriage in particular, can shape an alternative to the dominant cultural mentality and practice. Marriage today is most often based on the paradigm of contract, while Christians should build on the foundation of the covenant. Let us look at these to see how an embodied virtue of presence can contribute to

<sup>42</sup> Given the complexity of this task, Clapp believes that children are strangers too and that '... Christians have children so we can become the kind of people who welcome strangers'. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>43</sup> Maureen Junker-Kenny, 'Does Dignity Need a Theological Foundation?', pp. 57-66 in *The Discourse of Human Dignity*, Concilium 2003/2. Edited by Regina Ammich-Quinn et al (London: SCM Press, 2003), p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Marciano Vidal, 'Family Values and Ideals', in Cahill and Mieth, *The Family*, p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> On a more general notion of 'presence' as a virtue within Christian practices and tradition, see James Wm McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 104-9.

human dignity.<sup>46</sup> In a marriage based on the contract, partners are concerned with how they get what they think they deserve. The ideal state of contractual marriage is correspondence of interests. Furthermore, the very idea of contract contains the inherent notion of possible failure of the 'business', and actually predicts the steps for the possible termination of the relationship.

Within the covenant, the focus is on the willingness to give. The covenant is meant for life – it presupposes purposefulness. Relationships are perceived as shapers of identity, and their influence cannot be denied even when marriage ends in divorce. Finally, family covenants are not liable to role expectations as construed from the outside because the participants are those who create the content of their covenants.

Reading the entire story of God's dealing with his people as an account of the covenant, it may easily be argued that all relationships within the family should be modelled on this example. This is substantially different from the blind insistence on preserving the institution of the family *per se*, especially today when so many are suspicious of any form of family commitment. Thus, Christian families have the potential to be role-models, not so much with the purpose of showing what family should look like, but as a witness to a major story of God's covenant with his people which infuses meaning into all our relationships. The main form of this witness is the virtue of presence – '...being one's self for someone else; ... refusing the temptation to withdraw mentally and emotionally...'<sup>47</sup> This presence is the vital feature in the emerging postmodern world, in which people could not care less about the words of profession, denominational differences and doctrinal hair splitting; they are desperate to see someone *living* the truth. In our societies, crippled by alienation and avoidance, being there for others may help to bridge the gap between the private and the public, to focus Christian witness on real life issues, and to identify the family as a promoter of human dignity.

## Conclusion

A certain journey has been travelled in this paper. The discussion started with the notion of 'family values', but we discovered that the real issue is the 'role of the family'. In looking for a solution, we switched to the language of virtues. Here are the findings of the journey.

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<sup>46</sup> Most of the insights in this paragraph draw from Diana Garland's discussion in *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 334-42.

<sup>47</sup> McCleendon, *Ethics*, p. 106.

The disturbance of 'traditional family values' in many societies today can be seen not only as a sign of a deep moral crisis but as an indicator of the need to re-evaluate the notion of 'traditional' family, profoundly conditioned by modern capitalistic and consumerist presuppositions. After a closer examination, the current understanding of the role of the family shows it to be inadequate and deficient. However, the Christian response is to be formulated along the lines of the church which must, in Hauerwas' terms, '... stand as an institution that claims a loyalty and significance beyond that of the family. Only when such an institution exists can we have the freedom to take the risk to form and live in families.'<sup>48</sup> The church should turn to its primary mission and stop acting and believing as if the family is supposed 'to save the world'. Then the church can again become free to be a community formed by a tradition in which families can share if they take care to embody concrete and contextual virtues such as hospitality and presence. Only then will the family be able to look to the future, not with the prospect of extinction, but with the hope of assuming the role of a messenger of the Kingdom that can already, to use the insight of John Howard Yoder, be foretasted within and through the church.<sup>49</sup>

**Enoch Šeba** is Secretary/Assistant at the Theological Faculty 'Matthias Flecius Illyricus', Croatia and a student at IBTS, Prague.

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<sup>48</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 168.

<sup>49</sup> John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 228.



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