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# New Evangelization, New Families, and New Singles

Jana Marguerite Bennett

*University of Dayton*, [jbennett2@udayton.edu](mailto:jbennett2@udayton.edu)

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*Symposium on the 2015 Synod on the Family*

## New Evangelization, New Families, and New Singles

Jana Bennett

WHEN POPE FRANCIS ISSUED HIS CALLS for a synod in 2013, he stated that he wanted bishops to discuss the “pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization,” surely also a link to the recent calls for a “New Evangelization.”<sup>1</sup> Evangelization has long been tied to Catholic understandings of family.<sup>2</sup> Parents are deemed the original source of Christian evangelization and witness for their children, and thus the family is assumed to be at the center of any kind of broader evangelization that happens. It makes sense, then, that family becomes a central topic of conversation for bishops in relation to what it means to be church in the contemporary world. That said, in this brief discussion, I raise a tension in the 2015 Synod of Bishops on the Family. On the one hand, it seems to raise up the nuclear family as a kind of idol. On the other hand, it discusses several forms of singleness that present a more expanded and open view of the family.

### THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AS A POTENTIAL IDOL

My theological concern about too closely associating family and church is that family too easily becomes an idol rather than an icon. The Synod document begins its theological discourse by describing marriage and family as an icon of the Trinity (no. 38), and cites Pope Saint John Paul II to state “the family as the ‘way of the Church,’” (no. 44). Along the way, the document makes clear that the particular family in view is that of a married couple with children, which in many places is discussed in isolation, as though marriage and children are standalone tasks (for example, no. 39, no. 40, and again, no. 44).

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<sup>1</sup> Francis X. Rocca, “Pope Calls Synod to Discuss Families, Divorce, and Remarriage,” *Catholic News Service* (October 8, 2013) <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2013/pope-calls-synod-to-discuss-families-divorce-and-remarriage.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Pope John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 53, where one of his first calls to families is “The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable. It assumes the characteristics typical of family life itself, which should be interwoven with love, simplicity, practicality and daily witness.”

While I do think there is and should be a close relationship between church, family, and evangelization, a centralized focus on family as the origin of evangelistic witness threatens to make families idols, in place of Christ and Christ's body, the church. That is, the church and its members, including and especially single people who are often not counted as being part of "families," provide important witnesses and images of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Moreover, on my reading, *Lumen Gentium* described family as a "domestic church," a little church, one that could not be the fullness of church itself, but that could witness to the church, even as it learned more and more deeply what it might mean to live a daily family life that is continually open to God's daily grace.<sup>3</sup> At times, subsequent church documents, including the *Relatio Synod* at certain points, have missed making that crucial reciprocal relationship between Church and family, to the point of overemphasizing and even idolizing the place of family – especially the modern nuclear family – in the role of Christian evangelization.

My worries about idolatry when it comes to descriptions of family and evangelization are only bolstered when I consider important sociological trends in North America. First, adult nones—people who claim no particular faith life—are increasingly heads of households responsible for raising children.<sup>4</sup> Related, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton describe sociological data about the rise of a set of beliefs they term moralistic therapeutic deism in the millennial generation, data that suggests even households that are nominally Catholic are not likely to have a strong view of our God who carries all the mystery of the incarnation and the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The current crisis of faith even among nominally

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss both my critiques of "domestic church" as well as the theological visions of family and church that I think are most truthful, in much more detail in my book *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Pew Forum report in 2012, about twenty percent of adult Americans now consider themselves religiously unaffiliated. It is important to recognize that this does not mean, necessarily, that these adults are "agnostic" or "atheist" in any formal way. Indeed the vast majority of nones express some kind of beliefs in God, yet remain unaffiliated with any particular church community. See "'Nones' On the Rise," *Pew Forum Report* (October 10, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith's data suggest that an increasing number of millennial youth and young adults hold very generic beliefs about religion; those generic beliefs cut across religious lines, such that Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism are seen to hold similar beliefs. Some of those moralistic therapeutic deism beliefs include the idea that God does not interfere in our lives unless we particular seek God out and that God wants us to be basically (and materially?) happy. See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

Catholic families should raise questions about insulated nuclear families being able to carry out the New Evangelization.

The second trend stems from my current research on singleness: in an age when forty-eight percent of adult Catholics claim an identity of singleness in some variety (whether via divorce, widowhood, cohabitation, or being never married),<sup>6</sup> it is important not to dismiss nearly half the church's capacity for evangelization. This is especially the case if this dismissal comes from not considering these adult Catholics as members of "real" families understood as the contemporary nuclear family that is predominantly isolated and focused in on itself. If, then, in disseminating discussions about the Synod document and its theology, there is too over-exuberant a discussion of a nuclear family that stands uncontested, I think the Church will fail to provide a counter-cultural enough vision of marriage, family, and love that reflects what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Instead, it will foster an idolatry of the nuclear family.

My concern is therefore in how to read the 2015 *Relatio Synod* on marriage and family and the degree to which it serves to emphasize a contemporary and largely secular view of a standard nuclear family. In particular, I worry about the ways the document often describes families as stand-alone solitary units of self-contained parents with children at several points. For example, the Synod affirms and repeats that marriage involves the unitive good of the couple and the procreative generosity of the couple, which seem to emphasize *merely* the couple and their children – all potentially offering a picture of a perfect nuclear family more or less contained in itself. (no. 50) "Each family is asked to participate in the Church's mission in a unique and privileged manner." Others who do not fit into that vision of family are addressed as imperfect, as in section 53: "From the vantage point of divine pedagogy, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them, she encourages them to do good, to lovingly take care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work."

#### EXPANSIVE VIEWS OF FAMILY

Still, this lifting up of the nuclear family is not the only perspective in the *Relatio Synod*. At other places, it hints at a broader view of family that is integrally connected to the Church. When describing young married families, the Synod Fathers write, "Not infrequently, in the initial years of married life, couples have a tendency to isolate themselves and, consequently, from the community.... The local Church, by integrating the contributions of various persons and groups, assumes the work of coordinating the pastoral care of young

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<sup>6</sup> See Pew Forum, "US Religious Landscape Study" <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/>.

families.” Isolation is negative. Families are meant to be open and generous disciples. That openness is a two way street: families both accept help as well as offer help. “As Pope Francis forcefully reminds us, the mission of the family always extends outside itself in service to our brothers and sisters.” (no. 56). This more expansive and open notion of the family is even more pronounced by the various views of singleness the *Relatio Synod* discusses. While not all of the ideas on singleness presented in the document adequately addresses the sociological data on these states, taken as a whole these perspectives expand the understanding of the family and so work against idolizing the nuclear family.

### *Never Married*

According to the Pew Forum, as a percentage of adult church population, never marrieds comprise about twenty-one percent of Catholics in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Section 22 rightly highlights that people who are not married are *also* members of families, and often hold caregiving duties – despite predominant assumptions. The concept of family is necessarily inclusive of those who are not married, and moreover presumes the presence of never-married people. The *Relatio Synod* emphasizes that, “Their dedication greatly enriches the family, the Church and society.” At the same time, the *Relatio Synod* emphasizes the isolation of unmarried people, which doesn’t do justice either to single *or* married people and the potential of isolation in a late-modern capitalist society.

### *Cohabitation/Divorce/Remarriage*

For comparison’s sake to never-marrieds, eight percent of Catholics live with a partner without benefit of marriage.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that fewer Catholics cohabit than are never married, cohabitation merits discussion in at least six separate segments of the document. An additional twelve percent of US Catholics are divorced – and divorce features in eight separate sections.<sup>9</sup> What I think is notable is the way the document aims to incorporate – carefully and gingerly – cohabitating, separated, divorced, and remarried people in the Body of Christ. In section 53, we read: “Hopefully, dioceses will promote various means of discernment for these people and to involve them in the community to help and encourage them to grow and eventually make a conscious, coherent choice.” While incorporation likely will not include receiving communion for most – the tone is to emphasize the

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<sup>7</sup> “US Religious Landscape Survey,” <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/>.

<sup>8</sup> “US Religious Landscape Survey.”

<sup>9</sup> “US Religious Landscape Survey.”

ways that all people have the potential to participate in God's life, and all people are called to a life of discipleship.

### *Engaged*

As a state of singleness, engagement features often in this document. The *Relatio Synod* highlights how necessary the whole Christian community is for a properly sacramental marriage, as well as for authentic encounter with the Gospel. For example, we read: "The ministry on behalf of engaged couples also ought to be included in the general commitment of the Christian community to present, in a proper and convincing fashion, the Gospel message about the dignity of the person, his/her freedom and respect for his/her rights." (no. 57) Freedom and rights and the commitment of a whole community – this is not a call for an insular nuclear family. Moreover, the *relatio* ties engagement to the community as a whole in 59: "The Christian community, through its heartfelt and joyous participation, is to welcome the new family in its midst so that the new family as a domestic Church might feel a part of the larger ecclesial family."

### *Widows*

Widowhood is an unchosen state of life, currently comprising about seven percent of all Catholics, about the same percentage of cohabitating couples.<sup>10</sup> It is mentioned in only two sections – a lack that is all the more troubling given that in North America, widows and widowers experience about twice the rate of poverty as their divorced brothers and sisters. The document suggests that the emptiness left by the loss of spouse could be filled by other family members and, for the loneliest of widows who have no families, by church members. (no. 19) One of the interesting potential developments is the call to revive the order of widows, which functioned in the early church similar to the order of deacons – another path for practicing New Evangelization (no. 19).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the *Relatio Synod* offers a mixed discussion regarding family and the New Evangelization. On the one hand, it seems to focus on the nuclear family in an attempt to maintain family as a site of evangelization and so can lead to making an idol of the family. On the other hand, the *Relatio Synod* also suggests several types of singleness that together expanded the understanding of marriage and family. While these views of singleness do not always adequately address people in these situations, the fact that they are noted creates the possibility of a better understanding of the family and acknowledges the family's relationships to the church. It is worth concluding with

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<sup>10</sup> "US Religious Landscape Survey."

the following words from section 90, which highlight the family and Church as places of belonging. “The Church must instill in families a sense of belonging to the Church, a sense of ‘we’ in which no member is forgotten. All are encouraged to develop their skills and realize their plan of life in serving the Kingdom of God.” In an age of nones, moralistic therapeutic deism, and isolation, perhaps there is no better Good News than to know that we, all of us, belong to God and the Church as a place where we can learn how to live out all our familial relationships. My hope is that future discussions about marriage and family continue more deeply in this vein. **M**