

Family associations and good family policies

Introduction

The family cannot be isolated like a monad, Pope Francis told us when he received us in marking the 20th anniversary of the European Federation of Catholic Family Associations (FAFCE). As the Pope underlined, “Families need to go out from themselves; they need to dialogue and to encounter others, in order to build a unity that is not uniformity and that can generate progress and advance the common good” (Address of Pope Francis to the participants of the meeting organised by FAFCE, Clementine Hall, Vatican City, 1 June 2017).

Advancing the common good also means contribute to shape good policies which respond to the concrete needs of the families themselves. Thus, family networks are essential to provide a framework of mutual assistance and action, and to develop a bottom-up approach for effective family policies.

Mutual help

For more than a century, family associations all over Europe have been established to organise, above all, mutual aid between neighbouring families.

In France, in the 1920s, rural families gathered to buy a washing machine that passed from family to family during the week; later, they did the same with a television, gathering to watch together family shows.

In responding to simple and concrete needs, family associations can facilitate exchange, dialogue, sharing; in this way they accomplish their mission, of making the world more domestic and favouring an injection of family spirit into our local and national communities.

The family association, therefore, is naturally called to respond to new and evolving needs in accordance with the specific times and places in which they arise. Often, family associations meet needs well before they are provided by the public, so-called “welfare”, systems.

In Poland, for example, family associations help large families find homes and create networks of family-friendly local authorities.

In Austria, they utilize their networks to help

welcoming refugees. In the Czech Republic, they come to the aid of young mothers in difficulty, as well as parents with disabled children, and so forth.

Since the very beginning, family networks have been concerned first and foremost with education, because schools cannot do everything. Too often, parents find themselves deprived of means to take on the breadth of the task entrusted to them, since the overall education of children is a duty and at huge responsibility of parents: in other words, it is a question of a *munus* (i.e., ‘communion’, ‘duty’), intrinsically linked to the experience of motherhood and fatherhood. The educational sphere does not merely concern itself with the transmission of knowledge; rather, it bears responsibility for the formation of good habits, the cultivation of character, the embrace of tradition, and the discovery of purpose in life. This expanded understanding of education casts light on where family associations come into play, in support of this fundamental responsibility. It is essential to remember that those who educate always educate in the name and on behalf of parents.

Concrete actions

Indeed, thanks to their knowledge of the terrain, of the situation on the ground and of the concrete needs of the families that compose them and of the tools with which they operate, family associations are able to intervene with local authorities to propose concrete initiatives rooted in the common good, from accommodation and transportation to the fields of work and leisure, education and community life, health and the environment.

By regrouping at the local, national and European level, family associations naturally become interlocutors of national political authorities who are able to influence and sometimes even guide the action of the State, which has the responsibility to recognise the role of the family: as economic and development policies should favour the best possible conditions for entrepreneurs to create jobs and investments, at least in the same way they should favour an environment that makes easier for young people to have a large family.

On that regard, the particularity of France merits observation: French family policy is, to a certain extent, effective, as is visible in its comparatively high birth rates and robust women's participation rate in the labour market. As a result, French family policy has often been held up as an example, even though, for some years now these same policies have entered a phase of deconstruction. Since 1945, the National Union of Family Associations (UNAF) is an institutional partner of the French State and one of the main architects of its family policy, a partner that the Government and the Parliament are obliged to consult on any measure that has a direct impact on the life of families. Nonetheless, it must however be noted that, unfortunately, this system has not prevented

certain drifts in policy and its implementation.

There is no need to mention here the Hungarian family policies, which we often use an outstanding example of successful family policy, seen as a strategic and central policy of the action of the State, as an investment for the common good: we have seen how, next to the development of such policies, there has been a development of family networks and communities: they need to be strengthened, as they represent the future, to make sure that the very positive results obtained in the last decade will flourish beyond the political colour of the Governments in place.

A strong inspiration to develop family networks comes from the teaching and the encouragement of Saint John Paul II, who has been defined as the Pope of the Family. In *Familiaris Consortio*, he had already warned that “families should grow in awareness of being ‘protagonists’ of what is known as ‘family policies’ and assume responsibility for transforming society; otherwise – he continued – families will be the first victims of the evils that they have done no more than note with indifference.” (*Familiaris Consortio* 44). This last sentence sounds particularly prophetic for the Western world, as the FAFCE report on the “Promotion of SRHR and LGBT Rights at and through the EU and Council of Europe” has shown (edited by Maria Hildingsson in 2016 and published in Hungarian by the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2017). This is a reason more to work more strategically for the development of family associations not only in Europe, but everywhere in the world, adapting the work to be done to every specific reality.

The specific vocation of christian family associations

In their specific mission, Christian family associations are not only called to address Christian families, but also to bring their services to everyone: herein lies their evangelizing force. Indeed, the reference to the Christian faith is expressed mainly through their political, and eminently non-pastoral, activities and their proposals are based on the Social Doctrine, which – for Catholics – is enrooted in the Magisterium

of the Catholic Church, a rich, global and coherent source, generally respected as such even by those who do not adhere to it. The social teaching of the Church allows us to reach concrete proposals. Since family associations are humble practitioners of the Church's social teaching, they celebrate their Christian identity and so stand firm on it like a city built upon a mountain. Catholic Social Teaching, as the Pope Francis told

us in 2017, is founded on the dignity of the human person: “The way of ‘being family’ that you want to spread is not subject to any contingent ideology, but grounded in the inviolable dignity of the person. On the basis of that dignity, Europe will be able to be truly one family of peoples” (Address of Pope Francis to the participants of the meeting organised by FAFCE, Clementine Hall, Vatican City, 1 June 2017).

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1,27). When God creates the woman, it could be said that he creates the family as well, and it is there that this image and this similarity to God himself is realized, because the two of them, man and woman, together, are the image of God ... In this sense, the family is evangelizing by being itself. Therefore, family associations are not ecclesial or faith movements, they only facilitate, precede and follow this work of apostolate: evangelization is the duty of every Christian—as St Paul himself writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “woe is me, if I do not announce the gospel!” (1 Cor 9,16)—and this burning zeal to bring the love of God to everyone motivates family associations and provides a solid basis for their members’ commitment to their work.

For 25 years, the European Federation of Catholic Family Associations (FAFCE) has represented the associations of the majority of European countries.

Unfortunately, many European countries have yet to form an family associations. FAFCE’s mission is an undertaking of networking, information gathering, and effective interventions at the European institutions—especially the Council of Europe, European Parliament, and European Commission—to recall, in particular, the fundamental function of the family in our communities and to alert the nations of Europe to the reality of the demographic winter we are experiencing, considered by many to be a real form of suicide of Western societies.

FAFCE organizes, coordinates, and represents family organizations across Europe. Most significantly, FAFCE does this with very limited means: we often say that if every family who shares our values and supports our activities in Europe only gave us one euro, we would have much more than we need. With more funds, we could bring the experience of family associations further throughout Europe and wherever they do not yet exist, demonstrating that families are not a problem, but a solution and an opportunity. Compared to the many special interests and lobbies present in Europe, especially in Brussels and in Strasbourg, we have a unique strength, which is that of the Gospel, of the Good News that gives meaning to our work. Behind us, when we some times work in a somewhat solitary way in Brussels, alienated from the everyday life of the families we represent.

The experience of these years of pandemic

During this health crisis, all of us have experienced our families in a fresh and complete way: it was evident how distance from one’s family was one of the major causes of suffering. In the same way, in this time of war between two European countries, we see how families are the first to help, to welcome, to support.

On the basis of these experiences, we cannot fail to notice that the most pressing illness in our society is loneliness. The family is not a disease to be treated, but the treatment to the disease of loneliness. Thus, it is also possible for us to reflect on the meaning of the commitment and function of family associations. Thanks to them, policy-makers not only cannot lose contact with the “people” but must also support and accompany them.

A question arises: how can our service to families change, after a health crisis that left families more uncertain about the future and, often, in general indifference?

Being close to families means putting the family at the centre in a tangible way, because the family is the fundamental nucleus of every relationship. Interpreting his thought and also that of his predecessors, perhaps we can adapt a Latin brocard by saying: *ubi familia, ibi communitas*.

The family, in fact, is much more than a mere aggregation of individuals, subjects of rights. It is the originative social institution, at the service of its members, which develops an essential social function for the development of whole community. Moreover, analysing and understanding the

function of the family from both a legal and social point of view, we can experience the value of a realistic legal method that concentrates directly on the study of the function and the office, which is not only a quantitative collection of formal models. On these bases, we can say that the family, as a stable communion of life between man and woman founded on marriage, expresses all the requisites of reliability that the economic system needs. This is because two people bet on themselves, on a life together; and this mutual trust is so patent that the spouses are willing to legally bind

themselves by assuming reciprocal rights and obligations.

In addition, it is a type of trust that is unique and incomparable to other kinds of unions (even if recognized), because it is a union naturally open to life, a specificity which transcends the spouses themselves, with virtuous effects for the benefit of the common good and of the entire community (including for the fiscal system). This is a guarantee – as already mentioned – of a stable and lasting future, not only in the economic sense.