

The Family After COVID-19: Family Relationships in the Age of Non-Contact

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“Even before the pandemic hit, I realized that we were in a revolutionary moment where what would be impossible or even inconceivable in normal times had become not only possible, but probably absolutely necessary”: with these words full of enthusiasm, George Soros, the well-known Hungarian-born financier, welcomes the pandemic that has been scourging the world for over a year now; and he welcomes it as a unique opportunity not to be missed.¹ The World Economic Forum, which promotes the famous global meetings in Davos, Switzerland, takes the same stance. In fact, in January 2021 it has organized “The Great Reset Dialogues.” Its founder, Klaus Schwab, says: “The pandemic gives us this chance: it represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine and reset our world.”²

Representatives of the world’s financial, economic, political, and media establishment are therefore convinced that the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to bring about a revolutionary change in the economic and social system of capitalism, which allegedly has proven to be a failure and which it would be absolutely necessary radically to restructure in order to face our planet’s unprecedented challenge of climate change. Green economy and decarbonization, sustainable development, fight against inequality, control of primary resources, governance of migratory movements, digitalization and artificial intelligence are the chapters put on the agenda of the “Great Reset” project.

And what about the family – how does it fit in? The family has certainly been affected by the pandemic and by the projects of social engineering implemented in the context of the great social and economic reset. The family is, in fact, the place of the most intimate and significant relationships for human persons, where they are born, grow, and develop. It is here that we experience the fundamental relationships related to sexual affectivity and generation: being husband and wife, father and mother, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

These are all body-based relationships. Now COVID-19 is a pathology that strikes by way of relationships and by way of the body, and strategies to prevent contagion are based on social distancing. This has had tremendous consequences first and foremost on

¹ Interview with Gregor Peter Schmitz, *Project Syndicate*, 11 May 2020: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-crisis-of-a-lifetime-by-george-soros-and-gregor-peter-schmitz-2020-05>.

² Cf. Klaus Schwab – Thierry Malleret, *COVID-19: The Great Reset*, Forum Publishing, Geneva 2020, 244.

the family, triggering potentially epochal changes. How has the family reacted to these compulsory changes, which have led to confinement, the digitalization of work and school, and the isolation of people?

It must first of all be noted that the family, which has always been involved in social and cultural change, has in the last sixty years, especially in the more developed countries, in various forms and to varying degrees, experienced a profound and accelerated process of transformation, into which this new dramatic and unsettling event has been inserted. What are the family's possibilities of resisting and recovering after the pandemic?

From these initial observations emerge the three fundamental points around which my paper will be structured: 1) I will attempt to outline the phenomena of the transformation of the family that were already underway prior to the pandemic; 2) I will address the impact that the pandemic has had on families, i.e., the stress it has caused and is causing for family life; 3) I would like to propose some possibilities that the COVID-19 event has opened up for the future of the family and its role in a post-pandemic society.

1. The Transformations of the Family: Toward a Post-Familial Society?

Well before 2020, the family has been subjected to dramatic changes, which had their emblematic culmination in the so-called “sexual revolution” of 1968, which affected and disrupted its fundamental anthropological structure, which had previously appeared immutable.

The famous French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had asked himself: “if there is no natural law making the family universal, how can we explain why it is found practically everywhere?”³ Even in the plurality of its concrete manifestations and in the pluriformity of its historical and cultural models, the family appeared to him as a sort of “natural society” founded on a double bond, the “horizontal” bond, so to speak, given by the sexual relationship between man and woman, and the “vertical” bond given by the generational relationship between parents and children. In the same sense, the sociologist Pierpaolo Donati from Bologna speaks of the family as a set of primordial relationships, characterized by a kind of “genome,” that is, a latent structure, which, in a manner analogous to the biology of living organisms, can express itself in a diversified manner, but which does not cease to be the permanent nucleus of this reality.⁴

As stated above, this structure was strongly shaken by the “sexual revolution.” The struggle against repression was identified with the battle for the authenticity of the individual, understood as a pure affirmation of vitality. The systematic denigration and ridicule of the “common sense of modesty” was used to destroy conventional normative limits. This implied a change in the very idea of happiness as the goal of one's actions: the core of life's happiness had to be “sexual happiness” (Wilhelm Reich⁵), since only

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Family,” in Harry L. Shapiro, ed., *Man, Culture and Society*, rev. ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1971, 338.

⁴ Cf. Pierpaolo Donati, *Perché “la” famiglia? Le risposte della sociologia relazionale*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008.

⁵ Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution* (1936), Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1945.

through absolute, unlimited sexual freedom could human beings free themselves from their neuroses.

This revolution began with the separation of sexuality from procreation, and thus with the introduction of contraception (sex without babies) and artificial procreation (babies without sex). It continued with the separation of sex from the context of marriage and love, and finally resulted in the practice of “plastic” sexuality, eccentric, free even from reference to the difference between male and female. Sex has increasingly been reduced to the search for individual pleasure and become legitimized in all its expressions by gender ideology, which denies that there is any meaning in the language of the body.

The monogamous family as known by the tradition was then quite naturally made out to be the quintessence of a repressive social institution and the principal enemy of authenticity. Therefore, it had to be eliminated. And this was done not only through a direct battle against its basic structures (indissolubility of the marriage bond, paternal authority, procreation as the end of sexuality), but also through the promotion of a plurality of “liquid” models, which in practice amounted to a “liquidation” of the family as such. The battle against the family has become the battle for broadening the idea of the family, to the point of including any mode of living together that has a sexual context.

But toying with sexuality always has important and unpredictable social repercussions not only for the individuals involved, but also for society as a whole. Here, I would like to refer to the analysis provided by the CISF (*Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia*) 2020 Report on the family in Italy. Given the fact of globalization, to my mind this overview can also be useful in detecting analogous traits in other technologically advanced societies in the East and in the West.

Pierpaolo Donati affirms that we are now entering a “post-familial” society, in which the family progressively loses its social functions.⁶ He speaks of a “family warming”, that is, an increasing “overheating” of the family that causes it to evaporate: strong and institutionally sanctioned ties are lost, and emotions predominate, so that relationships become precarious and unable to withstand the challenges of life. Family relationships become increasingly complex and fragmented and at the same time more and more detached from formal structures and responsibilities. The interconnection between the spousal relationship and parenthood is dissolving: one can be a couple without marriage commitments and even without living together; one can be parents without having generated children through natural relationships, but through recourse to reproductive techniques, including surrogate motherhood. All this is made possible by today’s cultural setting, which combines a libertarian mentality with technological innovations, particularly in the fields of biomedicine and information and communication technology.

Families become “individual monads” that are being composed and decomposed as they happen to cross paths with other individuals. Prof. Francesco Belletti, Director of the Center for Family Studies, points out that in Italy “60% of families have one or two

⁶ Pierpaolo Donati, “L’opzione-famiglia in una società post-familiare: il gioco delle relazioni nel family warming,” in Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia, *La famiglia nella società post-familiare. Nuovo Rapporto CISF 2020*, Ed. San Paolo, Milano 2020.



members.”⁷ Families have thus become smaller and smaller, caught up in a “dramatic slimming down process,” while, according to the demographic curve, the number of couples with children will plummet in twenty years’ time, with an increase in young people not intending ever to get married. The Milanese sociologist concludes, “The resilience of the family seems to have reached a critical point. The rubber band is stretched to the maximum and is at a high risk of breaking. The family still exists, but for how much longer?” The rubber band is about to snap.

2. The Pandemic’s Impact on the Family

What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures of confinement and social distancing have on families already caught up in a revolutionary process of transformation?

On a preliminary note, it should be noted that the present crisis has shown the illusionary nature of the transhumanist project (see, for instance, the Singularity University of California), which predicted limitless linear growth on account of the so-called fourth industrial revolution based on massive digital innovation. Against such optimistic predictions, we have entered a scenario where virus-related diseases have been added to diseases connected with development and hyper-nutrition, resulting in the so-called “triple burden of disease.”⁸ According to economist Stefano Zamagni, this calls for greater humility and prudence: inhumane mega-cities have been built, destroying natural animal habitats and increasing social inequalities, and this is precisely the context that has favored the pandemic.⁹

And yet, in spite of everything, the family has been the rock on which people have stood firm. Even if it is opposed, abandoned or torn apart, the family is still a point of reference, confirming itself to be “a vital economic and social subject for the whole of society, showing us that relationships – in the family as elsewhere – count for more than money.”¹⁰

The family, however, has experienced and is experiencing formidable pressure. Research carried out in Italy by a group of social psychologists from the Centro di Ateneo of the Catholic University of Milan, directed by Prof. Camillo Regalia, together with the Human Highway Society, has documented the very strong tension to which family relationships have been subjected, especially in families with young children or adolescents¹¹. There was an overload of responsibility for the family, especially due to

⁷ Interview given by Francesco Belletti, Director of the CISF, on the occasion of the presentation of the CISF 2020 Report: *Famiglia Cristiana*, number 29 (16 July 2020).

⁸ Cf. Julio Frenk – Octavio Gómez Dantés, “The Triple Burden: Disease in Developing Nations”, in *Harvard International Review* 33 (2011), 36-40. The authors identify three elements: 1) the backlog of common infections, undernutrition, and maternal and child mortality; 2) the emerging challenges of non-communicable diseases related to hyper-nutrition (cancer, diabetes, and heart disease); and 3) issues related to globalization, such as pandemics and the consequences of climate change.

⁹ Cf. Stefano Zamagni, “La lezione e il monito della pandemia da Covid-19”, in *Pandemia e resilienza. Persona, comunità e modelli di sviluppo dopo la Covid-19*, a cura di C. Caporale e A. Pirni, Consulta Scientifica del Cortile dei Gentili, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Roma 2020, 31-38.

¹⁰ Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia, *La famiglia nella società post-familiare*, cit.

¹¹ C. Regalia – R. Rosnati – R. Iafrate – D. Bramanti – L. Boccacin – E. Carra’ – M. Lanz (eds.), *La Famiglia sospesa*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, Milano 2020.

the lack of support from institutions. Families were not always able to manage the stress and mitigate the anxiety caused by concerns about health and about the future, fueled by the discomfort of feeling “caged in” because of the restrictions on social contacts.

Two phenomena typical of the lockdown period have affected family life: working from home and distance learning.¹² As work and school time overlapped with family time, people had to negotiate domestic spaces and IT equipment, which did not always result in cooperative sharing but often led to conflict situations. Parents had to try to improve their digital literacy and update their technological prowess, at times without meeting much success.

Because of economic, social and cultural inequalities, resulting from income, household composition, level of education, and geographic location, great differences exist in the consequences the crisis has had. A report by Aloysius John, General Secretary of Caritas Internationalis, published in June 2020, shows how low-income households in the West, as well as poorer households in the most disadvantaged countries were the most vulnerable and most adversely affected, so that “the impact of the coronavirus increased inequality and inequality worsened the spread of the pandemic.”¹³

One issue in particular merits attention, inasmuch as it threatens to be gravely disruptive of society, namely the fact that the coronavirus has provoked a generational clash. What Giuseppe De Rita crudely but accurately defined as the “decimation of an entire generation” of the elderly has occurred: ousted from their homes and confined to residences that are often uncomfortable and impersonal, the elderly have been the virus’ preferred victims.¹⁴ This has dramatically highlighted the condition of loneliness and often outright abandonment in which the elderly of our developed societies live. They have turned out to be the most fragile and vulnerable, while young people have often not accepted and respected social distancing, believing themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be somehow “invulnerable.”

Just as for years now, the younger generations have turned their backs on the problems of unborn life, confining themselves to the egotism of the couple and, with abortion, denying to the unborn the same dignity that is accorded to life already born, so they are now disregarding the problems of the third and fourth ages. Thus, the generational conflict that has emerged in the pandemic crisis is not only a matter of demography but also of social justice.

To summarize this overview of the impact of the crisis on the family, one can highlight three points. First of all, the pandemic has shown the importance of social relations inside and outside the family, and especially within the boundaries between the inside and the outside: it was significant that one now had to define, even legally, who one’s relatives were and what was meant by “stable affections.” In fact, without relationships mediated by the body the virus does not exist. For health reasons, such relationships should be avoided, but how can one live without relationships? Secondly, digital

¹² Cf. P.C. Rivoltella, “Le sfide del digitale alle responsabilità familiari: educare le relazioni nella società iperconnessa”, in Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia, *La famiglia nella società post-familiare*, cit.

¹³ A. John, “Covid-19: pandemia, disuguaglianze e famiglia”, in *Family International Monitor* (2 June 2020).

¹⁴ Cf. F. D’Agostino, “La pandemia da nuovo corona virus e la quarta età: problemi di giustizia”, in *Pandemia e resilienza*, cit., 71-77.



communication technology has entered the scene on a massive scale, pretending not only to compensate for a temporary lack of relationships mediated by the body, but to replace them.¹⁵ But this disembodied mode of relating has uncovered disturbing new dangers for the person and the family. Thirdly, we have noted how, nonetheless, the family has surprisingly reasserted itself as a decisive factor for a healthy and prosperous society. But up to which point can the family continue to do so in a social context that is hostile to an authentic culture of the family?

3. The Possibilities Opened Up by the Pandemic

Can the pandemic also offer positive possibilities, as some economists and social engineers have argued? If so, in which sense? The decisive question is the criterion used to evaluate change. Pope Francis has stated that the issue is the following: “Since we never come out of a crisis the same way we did before, the problem is how to come out of it better and not worse.”¹⁶ But by what criterion do we judge improvement or degeneration? Will we use the one adopted by the World Economic Forum or the one of the good life, according to the principles of experience, of the heart, and of the natural law?

My thesis is that it depends on the family whether we will emerge better from this crisis. Against those who would like to exploit the present crisis to redesign the family in even more individualistic and privatistic terms, one must propose the opposite path, the one that leads to a relational and generative family, capable of defending the identity of the human person.

In one of his last speeches, on the occasion of his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI issued a cry of alarm precisely on the theme of the family. According to him, today the family is radically challenged in its natural characteristics as a relationship based on marriage as a stable bond between a man and a woman, directed toward the procreation and education of children. He affirmed that what is at stake here is not only a specific social construct, but the human being himself in his or her fundamental dignity. In fact, “when such commitment is repudiated, the key figures of human existence likewise vanish: father, mother, child.” If we lost these original experiences that give us identity, we would live in a society of individuals who no longer know themselves to be sons and daughters, who live in the confusion of sexual genders, who, as only children, have no brothers or sisters, who no longer want to be fathers and mothers. Detached from the family relationships that give identity and separated from God, the isolated individual becomes weak and fragile, the predestined victim of all forms of manipulation by the powers that be.

¹⁵ This question has been highlighted by U. Beck – E. Beck-Gernsheim, *L'amore a distanza. Il caos globale degli affetti*, Laterza, Bari 2012.

¹⁶ Francis, “Il mondo che vorrei,” Interview with Fabio Marchese Ragona on the Italian TV channel Canale 5, 10 January 2021: https://www.mediasetplay.mediaset.it/video/tg5/il-mondo-che-vorrei-parla-papa-francesco_F310742101000101

But as we have said, there is an alternative. The sociologist Pierpaolo Donati affirms that it is necessary to promote the

“relational family, in which the relationships between men and women, as well as between generations, are characterized by trust, cooperation and reciprocity as a project that reflects life. That is, the family is a social structure of care relationships that, due to the couple’s generativity and the transmission of life to subsequent generations, has within itself the ability to accomplish a specific life-project lived in common (...). The relational family indeed takes care of others, but it does so by looking at the goodness of family relationships and the fruits they bear, giving priority to relationships over individual interests, in the awareness that only relationships that have the family’s specific natural genome can ensure the human, sexual and generational identity of each person, in the synergy of the differences.”¹⁷

Here emerges the second characteristic of the family that needs to be promoted: Its generativity, that is, its capacity to welcome life and to know how to transmit it. The family is the “sanctuary of life,” as Saint John Paul II used to say,¹⁸ the place where human life, especially when it is weak and fragile, is welcomed, safeguarded and allowed to grow, where an authentic culture of life can take shape.

The generativity of the family goes beyond the procreative dimension and becomes the capacity to produce relational goods, such as the virtues that allow society to exist and grow. The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero defined the family as *seminarum rei publicae*,¹⁹ the nursery where the common and public life of society is cultivated. Today, we speak of the family as a producer of social capital.²⁰ This concept refers to the patrimony and cultural resources that sustain relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity among people. One can easily understand that in order not to become inhumane and self-destructive, a society needs to draw on the values of mutual trust, loyalty and solidarity, precisely within the sphere of the primary relationships proper to the family. The family constitutes the primary social capital, which then provides the basis for all secondary social capital, constituted by associative networks and relations in the civic sphere. Social capital is therefore a relational asset produced and enjoyed together, necessary for society to exist.

The reasoning here is extremely straightforward: society has a vital interest in promoting the primary agent in the formation of social capital, which is the stable monogamous family, based on the fruitful union between a man and a woman. In recognized sexual difference there is the archetypical form of welcoming the other in his or her identity and otherness, which is the foundation of reciprocity. Only insofar as it is stable can the bond have a positive function for the persons involved and accomplish its role in education. Only in the generation and education of children does society secure its future. Only in the support of the weakest and the elderly, guaranteed

¹⁷ Pierpaolo Donati, “L’opzione-famiglia in una società post-familiare”, cit.

¹⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995, n. 92.

¹⁹ M.T. Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, 54.

²⁰ Cf. Pierpaolo Donati, “La famiglia come capitale sociale primario,” in Pierpaolo Donati, ed., *Famiglia e capitale sociale nella società italiana*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2003, 31-101.

by the family, is society capable of responding adequately to emerging and increasingly important social needs.

From the point of view of Christianity, moreover, the family is at the heart of the experience of faith. The family is the first original witness to the Creator: in fact, there is no family without reference to the Creator, as attested by the mother of the seven martyred brothers in the Second Book of Maccabees (II Mac 7). Sexual difference, the stable and faithful covenant between a man and a woman, and the generous openness to life are foundational elements of the Creator's wise design, in correspondence with what the wisdom of humanity has recognized as constitutive of the natural law.

In the Biblical Revelation of the Old and New Testaments, God chose precisely the symbolic language of the family to reveal himself, so that the experiences of being son and daughter, brother and sister, husband and wife, father and mother are the natural linguistic basis for speaking intelligibly about God and for understanding his relationship with us and our relationship with him and with each other.

Conclusion

The pandemic obstructs our breathing, not only physiologically through the sometimes-lethal effects of the COVID-19 viral disease, but also socially and humanly through the fear provoked by social isolation. Jean Guittou said that just as we need the atmosphere to breathe, so we need an "erosphere" to love.²¹ Love suffocates if one isolates it as something private and unrelated to the rest of the world.

The family is the place where we can begin to breathe again, within those foundational relationships that give us identity and reveal our role in the world, generating new social relationships. The challenges of the Great Reset cannot be met with forms of social engineering that denature the family, close it in on itself and privatize it, causing even greater isolation in individuals. Rather, to meet these challenges one needs to promote a family that is in keeping with its natural character and in accordance with the original divine plan, a family that is both relational and generative, capable of welcoming life and making it grow.

²¹ Jean Guittou, *L'amour humain*, Aubier, Paris 1955.