


# Understanding the role of a 'large' family in the teaching of Pope Francis

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**Dates:**

Received: 11 Nov. 2023

Accepted: 10 Jan. 2024

Published: 30 Apr. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Pyżlak G.J., 2024,  
'Understanding the role of a 'large' family in the teaching of Pope Francis', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a9572. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9572>

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Family is perceived as the most important environment in which humans develop and satisfy their basic needs. Therefore, the issues concerning the family are still current and of great interest for numerous theoreticians and researchers of various fields of science. Pope Francis also devoted a part of his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* to the issue of the 'larger' family. In the teachings of Pope Francis spouses and parents should make a responsible use of their freedom, both with regard to procreation, taking into account the social and demographic reality, as well as to the possibility of bringing up their offspring. Conjugal love, which, in Catholic families, is expressed in fertility, is a reason for great joy for the Church. What is innovative in the Pope's approach to the tasks of the 'large' family is mainly the help provided to the people who are victims or to those who are experiencing difficulties in their family homes. Another important issue concerns proper building relations and mutual respect between people creating a 'large' family. To achieve this, we must remember to provide mutual assistance and recognise the dignity of each of its members as persons.

**Contribution:** This article holds that apart from the small circle formed by spouses and their children, there is also a 'large' family that cannot be ignored. It is necessary for the development of the society and it is a great opportunity for their future. In the teachings of Pope Francis, it is a family that is not afraid to take on current challenges. The basic task of a 'large' family is to provide support and love to the people who belong to it.

**Keywords:** marriage; large family; extended family; larger family; difficult situations.

## Introduction

Teaching about family, Pope Francis maintains the order which results from God's plan, as, firstly, he raises the question about marriage: what is marriage? Secondly, he answers that marriage is the true and authentic vocation (see Pope Francis 2013:17). The vocation for marriage refers to the family built mainly on the sacramental marriage which is inscribed into the nature of man and woman (Pyżlak 2016:163). In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis indicates that, apart from the traditional model of family, there are also its alternatives, such as e.g. the monoparental family the living apart together family (LAT), the nomadic family, the reconstructed family or the patchwork family (Burcka 2017: 61). It is worth to notice that the original term 'family' was mainly resulting from blood ties and it involved the persons connected by blood ties as well as by affinity. Therefore, the Holy Father indicates the wider perception of the 'large' family and its role. This concept of the 'large' family is most common in the pedagogical literature. It is defined as a family with many children and a multigenerational family, where there are many interpersonal relations because of a numerous number of family members as well as to the variety of characters and personal features (Wilk 2002:57–58). The Holy Father notices that 'In addition to the small circle of the couple and their children, there is the larger family, which cannot be overlooked' (AL 196). In order to present the specific nature of the 'large' family, Francis uses the division into the 'larger' family that includes: teenage mothers, children abandoned by their parents, people with disabilities, people who struggle with addictions, singles, people who are widowed or in separation, people who suffer from loneliness, elderly people and the sick who were abandoned by their children, as well as the people 'even those who have made shipwreck of their lives' (AL 197). While, regarding the in-laws and cousins of both spouses, he uses the term a 'wider' family. The specific nature of the existence of the 'large' family mainly requires providing support and love to its members (see AL 196; cf. Bossard 2016:273–289).

The author of this article will try to present the 'larger' family and its specific nature as presented by Pope Francis. The aim is also to present such a family in the broader perspective as 'larger'

and 'wider'. The article is an attempt to indicate the suggestions for solving problems, which a 'large' family faces and the ways of supporting such a family by proper institutions.

## Method

In this article the scientific methods of analysis and synthesis are used. The first one helped to analyse the collected research material and to determine the proper research issues for the chosen subject (Łobocki 2005:212). The other method helped in the comparison of the elements of the discussed issue extracted by the analysis and in collecting them into one piece (Kamiński 2017:84–88). The primary and secondary sources were helpful in the realisation of the scientific research. The primary sources took the qualitative form and used individual interviews and observations. The secondary sources have been obtained from the previously conducted analyses and from the knowledge based on the source documents. The methods used for the article were supposed to help in explaining the proper meaning – the vision and the role of the 'large' family on the basis of the teaching of Pope Francis. While using these methods it was important to find the answer to the following questions: How does Pope Francis see the 'large' family? What challenges does the family face in the contemporary times?

## The 'large' family – 'larger' and 'wider'

In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis, while teaching about the 'large' family, at first refers to the small circle of the couple and their children. Then, referring to the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II, he indicates love as the 'unceasing inner dynamism', which at first has to appear in certain order:

[B]etween husband and wife and, in a derivatory and broader way, the love between members of the same family-between parents and children, brothers and sisters and relatives and members of the household (...) leading the family to ever deeper and more intense communion, which is the foundation and soul of the community of marriage and the family. (FC 18)

The family built on such grounds with their friends, befriended families and communities of families is capable of supporting one another in difficult situations in the social commitments and in faith (see AL 196).

### Teenage mothers

Referring to the 'larger' family, Pope Francis highlights that 'should provide love and support to teenage mothers' (AL 197). The term 'teenage mothers' should refer to girls aged 11–19; however, the *Civil Code* that attempts to clarify this condition regards a minor to be a person who is under 18 years old or who has not contracted marriage yet (cf. Stańczak 2011:1025). The situation of minors is in most cases connected with their critical conditions and the crisis they are

experiencing. The effectiveness of dealing with a crisis by minors depends on the support of, among others, the staff of the centres which provide help as well as on the individual predispositions and resources of a young person. It is essential to react to each difficult situation experienced by young people because they can increase and disturb their development. Being overloaded by crises and the lack of support from adults usually negatively influence all the spheres of the functioning of minors (eds. Mulherin & Johnstone 2015:297).

Teenage pregnancies are a worldwide phenomenon. According to the report of the World Health Organization published in 2020, we notice that every year around 12 million girls aged 15–19, among whom at least 777 thousand who are under 15 years old, give birth to children. The reason for their decision results from too early sexual initiation of teenagers. In order to realise mature parenthood, people are required to reach biological and mental maturity, to mutually love each other and to possess proper knowledge about sexual life. It is an essential task for teenagers to seek for their own identity, which conditions their entering the adult world. The lack of harmony in reaching maturity can be a serious source of problems among which there is also teenage parenthood (see Goleń 2006:52–75; Sieja 1998:154–156).

### Children abandoned by their parents

Secondly, Pope Francis, teaching about the 'larger' family refers to the situation of children abandoned by their parents. The abandonment is explained as being left alone to their own fate while they were supposed to be taken care of by their parents or custodians. It should be highlighted that it does not only concern to give up the care for a minor or an inept person but also mainly to depriving of the possibility to provide help to the person who needs an immediate support (Warylewski 2012:67). The main factor that results in the decision to abandon the child or children by their parents is poverty. Such a situation may take place when the child is born, already in the hospital. The abandoned child is taken to a care and educational institution, for example, an orphanage or a family foster home. While the abandoned newborn children have the chance to find a foster family or to go for adoption. It sometimes happens that teenage parents decide to transfer the care for their child to other family members.

The situation of abandonment of a child also takes place when one of the parents, the father or the mother, leaves the family home to move in with a newly met partner and as a result of that he or she is no longer interested in the fate of the child or children. Then the abandonment of the child is perceived as 'a grossly negligent breach of their parental duties', which can lead to depriving the parent of their parental custody (Faulkner 2018:art. 111 § 1).

## People with disabilities

Thirdly, Pope Francis refers to the people with disabilities who should also be taken care of and loved (AL 197). From the medical point of view, disability is defined as a bad health condition, which can directly result in chronic diseases while the resulting impact of that is the condition of the irreversible condition of the body dysfunction (see Paluszkiwicz 2015:77–98). In such a situation, the family is essential for the development of the child with disability. The family is responsible for creating for the child a micro world, which would not be possible to be recreated in different conditions. Sometimes the parents decide to give the care of the child with disability to a specialised institution as they are aware of being helpless in this life situation. A child with disability requires therapy from the first moments after birth (Faber & Mazlish 1986:128; Kuzanowski 2003:135–144).

## People struggling with addictions

Fourthly in the 'larger' family, to which the Pope refers are the people who struggle with addictions (see AL 197). The addiction is most often defined as an acquired strong need to perform certain actions or to take some addictive substance. This refers to the people who overuse drugs, medicine, alcohol or cigarettes. In a broader context we can also refer to the additions to gambling, watching TV or to the Internet. According to the *Directory for the Pastoral Care of Families* in the contemporary times we notice that addictions mainly concern alcoholism, drug addiction, religious sects or pansexuality (see Polish Episcopal Conference 2003:69).

The alcohol addiction strongly regards the condition of the family of the addict as they are the environment where he or she lives. This environment is often subjected to various manipulations, which often leads to being co-addicted. One of the specific features of a co-addicted person is the fact that even though this person does not drink alcohol himself or herself, his or her life is still totally focused on alcohol (Sztander 1995:5). Referring to the people who are prone to drug addictions, it is noticed that these are people of an unstable personality (Pyżlak 2020:67). One of the most common reasons for this addiction is the disorder of family relationships, especially the excessive permissiveness, overprotection and sometimes the mothers' ambivalence or the rejective or hostile attitudes of fathers. Drugs seem to be the way out of the conditions that are considered to be too difficult for the people who experience instability or failures (Rogala-Oblękowska 2004:83–84). Among the reasons of joining religious sects by adults there are, among others, 'the of hunger for faith' and the personality crisis. Catholics usually join religious sects due to religious or moral conflicts which they have with the Church or with a priest. Such people often seek solutions of their life problems in the sects. While young people who join sects are usually motivated by interest and fascination. Among the most common causes of joining the sects there are: the lack of reference of detailed points to the overall ideas, the lack of healthy criticism and credulity (Congar 2003:214). Sects consist

of small groups where people can satisfy their psychological needs, find refuge from uncertainty, from the lack of acceptance and from risk. Belonging to sects results but in the damage to the mental health, which may be manifested as mood swings – from euphoria to depression (Kosińska & Gajewski 2004:63–65). The addiction to pan eroticism is defined as the strongly sensual love. Its basic problem is the fact that the earlier and more frequently someone is exposed to eroticism, the more serious is the eroticisation of the mind – the pan eroticism expressed in dreams, utterances, jokes, games and the 'creativity' of the sexual nature, provocative behaviour. It may also be accompanied by behavioural disorders, for example, use of stimulants, neurotic symptoms, the development of sexual deviations and pathologies as well as behaviours connected with criminal acts (Kornas-Biela 2004:158).

## The unmarried

Fifthly, in a 'larger' family to which Pope Francis refers in his teaching, are singles (see AL 197; see Isherwood 1993:75–79). Such a choice in life may result from the artificiality and shallowness of relationships when the interpersonal relations become incomplete and contacts with others are very superficial and easily broken. The researchers who deal with this problem indicate the transformations taking place in the contemporary families. Many people consciously put off in time their marriage and family plans. Among the reasons of this situation there are demographic, social and economic factors. With regard to the first factor we can enumerate the discrepancies in the gender structure. This is mainly the result of migrations – the internal and foreign ones, which limit contracting marriages particularly among the people aged 20–29. In the sphere of social values we notice transformations concerning the expectations from life in marriage and in the family as well as the choice of the life partner. Such a life choice is also the result of the prolonged period of education of the people aged 20–29 and the professional activity of women. Among the economic factors that influence delay in contracting marriage there are also material problems (Kwak 2005:64–66; Urbańska 2018:264).

The main problems that singles face are loneliness, which in time can become chronic or may appear temporarily at the moment of breaking an emotional bond or in case of losing a close person. There are also psychological factors, which increase the possibility of feeling lonely such as low self-esteem, which may result in avoiding contact with others because of the fear of being rejected. Such a behaviour leads to the low self-esteem of a person whom this condition concerns, the lack of trust and avoiding social contacts.

## People living in separation as well as widows and widowers

In his teaching the Pope also refers to the problem of the people who live in separation and of widows and widowers

(see AL 197). Although according to the ecclesial legislator, marriage contracted between the baptised in the Catholic Church is inseparable, in some conditions married couple can resort to separation (the Code of the Canon Law 1984:Can. 1055, § 1). In the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope indicates that:

In some cases, respect for one's own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. (AL 241)

Therefore, guarding the inseparability of marriage, the Pope allows for the separation, which consists in the judicial regulation for the actual separation of the spouses without the dissolution of marriage. Such a solution can be treated as temporary, which will serve for the reconciliation of the spouses. In such a situation formally the marriage is still valid but the spouses are not obliged to live together. In order to avoid overusing the institution of separation Pope Francis specifies that:

At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference. (AL 241)

The Pope considers separation to be the last resort 'after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain' (AL 241).

Regarding widowhood we should notice that the widowed spouse who is experiencing the mourning also has a difficult time because of losing one of the breadwinners. For widows and widowers, it is a particular time to take the important decision about the further life. The Church allows widows and widowers down to contract the sacrament of marriage, considering it to be valid and fair. In the New Testament we can find Saint Paul's statements who even recommends remarrying expressing the will: 'So I would like younger widows to marry, have children, and manage a home, so as to give the adversary no pretext for maligning us' (1 Tm 5,14). He refers also to the situation when young widows were leading indecent life; therefore, he considered it to be recommended to remarry (see 1 Tm 5, 10–13). With regard to widowhood the Church recommends perseverance in this condition because of religious reasons. The Second Vatican Council encourages to that indicating the return to the consecrated widowhood (Parzyszek 2007:24–25).

### The elderly and the sick

In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* teaching about the 'larger' family Pope Francis indicates elderly people and the sick who suffer from loneliness (AL 197). Loneliness has a physical dimension and it is connected with the real lack of the other person around. Therefore, it is necessary to shape the attitude of the care for others and respect for the life. It is also connected with responsibility for incidents and for the

previous and current decisions the results of which will influence the future (Pyżlak 2020:100–101).

Preparation for one's own old age since the very young age is an important challenge. Many people consider it with the fear of one's death and with uncertainty as not always elderly people can count on the care of support. Old age is not an illness but it is a natural period of life. The wisdom and experience of elderly people could be of great use for the family environment as well as for the society. Elderly people, because of their maturity and experience, can provide advice and valuable tips to children, young people and to spouses.

Addressing elderly people, Pope Francis refers to their experiences connected with illness. His message on the thirty first World Day of the Sick began with a warning that 'Illness' is part of our human condition. Yet, if illness is experienced in isolation and abandonment, unaccompanied by care and compassion, it can become inhumane' (Pope Francis 2023:1). Help provided to the sick should be adequate to the criterion of the reduction of physical, psychological and mental strength of the elderly.

### People and their life choices

In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis refers to 'those who have made shipwreck of their lives' (AL 197). It is worth to notice that man's development mainly results from making choices. Human life consists in the constant decision-making and it regards both parents and children alike. Good choices result in a better life, while wrong decisions result in unpleasant consequences which will constantly remind of the committed mistake. Therefore, we should be aware of the choices that we make, being careful in making commitments with regard to what is to last longer even for the whole life (Smykowski 2013:15–16). The Pope is aware of the seriousness of the situation of the children and he encourages to help them:

[M]ake up for the shortcomings of parents, detect and report possible situations in which children suffer violence and even abuse, and provide wholesome love and family stability in cases when parents prove incapable of this. (AL 196)

### In-laws and relatives of the married couple

In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis using the term 'larger' family teaches that 'this larger family includes fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law and all the relatives of the couple' (AL 198). The misunderstandings between spouses and in-laws are more common nowadays. The problems between them often result from the spouses' fault as they are not able to critically refer to their parents, remodel their relations and, what is most important, become independent from their parents. A well experienced period of preparation to contracting marriage, mostly the well-prepared day of focus retreat, will definitely help in ordering the relationships between in-laws and spouses and other relatives. The document of the Polish Conference

of Bishops called *Serving the truth about marriage and the family*, in which bishops indicate that the focus day of retreat can become 'the time of special grace for parents, siblings, the family and friends of the fiancés' (Polish Episcopal Conference 2009:101). It can be organised as a single event or once per quarter or in six months. During the day of focus retreat, the gathered couples should be advised how to make an examination of conscience in their marital life. Then they should be given examples of the forms of support for the future spouses in their preparation for marriage, which include prayer and practising everyday kindness. During the conference, the lecturers should deal with the subjects concerning building the relationships between the in-laws and the fiancés based on the text Matthew 10, 7–9, present the requirements of the marital spirituality beginning with the text Matthew 7, 21–27. Apart from participation in the conference, the future spouses should participate in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (Polish Episcopal Conference 2009:101).

### Separation of young married couples

The life of the spouses with their in-laws and relatives requires their emotional maturity thanks to which their priority would be to care for developing the bond between the husband and the wife. Maturity of the spouses should be manifested in their attitudes of assertiveness and firmness towards their parents who, in the face of a new life situation of their child, too often still demand the child to be submissive and obedient (Pulikowski 2008:89). One of the solutions that would not disorder the functioning of the larger family and which is beneficial for building of the marital relation is the separation of the young spouses in their own house or flat. Such a decision allows for their separation, privacy, intimacy, building their life without witnesses even so close as the parents. This decision should also contribute to the formation of responsibility for their own home in the spouses (Tykarski 2014:199).

### Conclusions

Despite the current trends that promote the nuclear family consisting of only the parents and their children, Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* particularly promotes the 'large' family. He uses a different terminology than the one used in scientific disciplines, for example, in pedagogics in order to present the specific nature of the 'large' family, which consists of not only the parents and children but also of relatives and cousins, in which the married couple is the core. The Pope is not afraid to undertake the issues of current challenges of large families. He notices that the problem of teenage motherhood is often omitted in the public debates. The lack of the adequate counselling and proper long-term solutions as well as the helplessness of the systems, which are incapable to deal with the problems of teenage mothers are serious obstacles for their functioning and further development. In his teaching, the Pope emphasises human dignity, which is essentially inscribed into Christianity. Therefore, he discusses both the fate of the

children abandoned by their parents and of people with disabilities because every human is wanted by God and everybody constitutes the integral part of the society. The Pope also indicates the people who are struggling with addictions. A human person is bestowed with dignity and autonomy from the moment of conception in every stage of their development, regardless of their physical or spiritual condition. With regard to the care for such people, certain proper measures should be taken, which aim at supporting both these people and their families.

Furthermore, Pope Francis notices the need to provide help to singles, to those who live in separation or the widowed ones as they suffer from loneliness; the group also comprises the elderly and the sick as well as the in-laws and relatives of the spouses.

In his teaching Pope Francis discusses the issues of marriage and the family with great concern. However, during the 2017 press conference on board of a plane, he presented a controversial point of view on the 'large family'. The Pope's speech reflected certain corrections of the Catholic teaching on the generous and prudent fertility. And yet, the Catholic family should give life to many children, the fact which in contemporary time is reflected in having only three children. It should be noticed that in the teaching of the Church, a child is a gift for the parents and for the communities to which the family belongs. Whereas 'the responsible parenthood' does not only mean learning and respecting biological processes but also controlling the sexual drive by means of the mind and of the will. It does not result only in the prudent limitation of fertility in justified cases but also in the parents' taking responsibility for every conceived life.

We can also notice that Pope Francis treats the difficult situations of 'large families' in a humane way. However, in the contemporary times, indulgence with regard to such situations as, for example, divorce and separation, in many cases negatively influences the mentality of Christians, resulting in taking the easiest choice of such solutions. Among the challenges that concern the 'large family', there is the improvement of the preparation for marriage and family life. A properly experienced time of preparation should influence the proper building of enduring conjugal and family bonds, based on love and responsibility, which helps to cope with difficulties and to avoid the trap of the mentality of rejection.

### Acknowledgements

#### Competing interests

The author declared that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

#### Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

The project is implemented within the funds Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland.

## Data availability

Based on Article 12 point 7 of the *Act of April 4, 2019* on the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities (Journal of Laws, item 848), also referred to as the 'Act on digital accessibility', this document defines the technical conditions for the publication of the Declaration of Accessibility and the structure electronic document of the Declaration of Accessibility. Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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