

***RelatioSynodi*, Healthy Relationships and Young Families: A Moral Theological Reflection in view of Marriage Catechumenate**

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Abstract

The III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops' *RelatioSynodi* states that engaged couples and young families need pastoral accompaniment so that they can effectively integrate their affective and heterosexual love. This article highlights certain indices for healthy premarital relationships that serve as firm foundation for what the Synod Fathers express. Specifically, it stresses the importance of cultivating 'daily life as sexual spirituality' as well as '*amor benevolentia*', '*amor complacentia*', and '*amor concupiscentia*'. To realise *RelatioSynodi*'s vision, the Church during the forthcoming XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ought to take serious the importance of marriage catechumenate structured along four heterosexual relationship periods corresponding with three phases of religious formation.

Keywords: *Catechumenate, Family, Love, Marriage, Synod of Bishops*

1. Introduction

'The day of the storm is not when to fix the thatch' (an old English saying). Indeed, the concern for stable and sound marital homes should not begin on the eve of marriage. The III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops clearly expresses concern for pastoral preparation and accompaniment of engaged couples and young families so that the affective and sexual dimensions of their heterosexual love are integrated as divinely willed. The principal argument of this contribution is that there are several issues that many of our yet to be married youths are confronted with everyday and sometimes they are just too overwhelmed to know how to think their way through them. The kind of healthy conjugal and familial relationships that the Synod Fathers have in mind can be built only if

bachelors and spinsters are helped to enter into healthy relationships that can lead to marriage. Romantic love is not enough because sometimes it is like “sandcastles for two” (Mitchell, 2003 p. 199). Also, belonging to the same faith is no guarantee for a stable and happy marriage. Statistically, divorce happens mostly during the early years of marriage, perhaps because young couples were insufficiently prepared to face the challenges, fantasies, and realities ahead of them (Bruun & Ziff, 2010 pp. 6-7; Mitchell, 2003 pp. 199-201). I agree with Bruun & Ziff that “it is less expensive both emotionally and financially for couples to work *prior* to marriages, to talk and learn about themselves and each other, guided by knowledgeable professionals – both mental health and clergy” (pp. 7-8, italics original). Hence, this article offers some reflections on certain indices and imperatives for healthy relationships that serve as firm foundation for what the Synod Fathers insist upon regarding care for newly engaged, and young families.

2. *RelatioSynodi's* Concern for healthy relationships in young families

RelatioSynodi [RS] (Synod of Bishops), the definitive text of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (5-19 October, 2014) offers some reflections on the importance of cultivating and sustaining healthy relationships especially in the context of young families. For instance, RS recognises that a lot of Christian families live in individualistic milieu which can have negative impact on the quality of young families. Accordingly, young families must be helped to create “relationships of self-giving and creative reciprocity, which are empowering and supportive like those within a family” (no. 9). The Church, therefore, is committed to assisting such young families cultivate affectivity indicative of what Phiri (2011) calls '*communiopersonarum*' – communion of persons with equal dignity – founded on Trinitarian life (pp. 80, 85-86). Affectivity in family life, rooted in Christ, helps to promote the dignity of marriage and the family (RS 17). In the light of affectivity's importance in family life, the Synod Fathers charge the Church to offer lovingly firm guidance to engaged couples preparing for marriage. The Fathers reiterate the importance of cultivating virtues, especially that of chastity, “in the genuine growth of love between persons” (RS 39). Young families must be pastorally accompanied in their early years when they are forging healthy familial relationship. It is instructive RS notes that “pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the Sacrament” (§ 40). This is important because “The initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of

the challenges and meaning of married life" (§ 40). As stated above, divorce happens mostly during the early years of marriage, perhaps because young couples were insufficiently prepared to face the challenges ahead of them. Hence, the Church has to be proactive in stemming this tide. A realistic place to begin is to *re-treat* the foundation of romantic relationship in view of marriage.

3. Chemistry of love: The dynamics of romantic relationships

How can an intensely positive phenomenon, 'falling in love', even among two pious Christians, end up in bitter aggression and deep-seated hatred, sometimes even leading to self-destruction? Some have explored this question, looking at a largely neglected foundation i.e. the 'chemistry of love'(Ellens, 2009; Mitchell, 2003). For instance, Ellens argues that disaster happens among lovers and married couples because of their poor understanding of the dynamics of 'falling in love', 'being in love', and 'marriage'. The intensity of passion and attraction which characterise the earliest days of 'falling in love' normally drops in married lovers usually after the birth of the second child. By the seventh year of relationships, restlessness sets in. Couples experience boredom and distaste for routine not because they are necessarily having extramarital affairs. If such happens, it is more of a symptom than the intention. Actually, love has chemistry in the real sense. Love is based on an electricity of attraction. Something in the potential lover triggers his/her electricity of attraction i.e. a set of bio-chemicals (Dopamine, Norepinephrine, and Phenylethylamine [PEA]) are released into the brain just by a look, smile, smell, or touch. The trigger ("surge of force in the central nervous system") usually caused by response to a sense stimulus releases into the bloodstream a large amount of those chemicals that are very much like amphetamines that are present in hard drugs. This biochemical release occasions a high state of "intoxicated excitement". It is the state of being high just as when on amphetamines, 'hard drugs' (p. 24).

We could notice when these bio-chemicals are released into the bloodstream. One experiences 'flushed face', 'heavy breathing', 'sweaty hands', 'unstable voice', and/or 'thirst' which is why such reactions are associated with 'falling in love'. Anyone who has 'fallen in love' before can easily remember s/he experienced some of these reactions. Unfortunately, love's 'intoxicated excitement' does last forever(p. 24). The body develops tolerance to Phenylethylamine – just as it does to amphetamines. The

person in love has to keep increasing the dosage of the chemicals to have the same effect. By implication, the person who caused the initial reaction has to keep increasing the intensity and provocation of the triggers. As time goes on, larger doses of PEA are needed to “feel intensely *in love* as at first” (p. 24). After about 4 years, the capacity to produce PEA reduces. Chemical fizzling can spell doom for those hitherto 'madly in love'.

So, while initially a simple smile might have been sufficient in the beginning, over time a simple smile might no longer be sufficient, and a more complex, suggestive, seductive smile might be needed which is why ignorance of the chemistry of love can begin to spell doom for a romantic relationship. For instance, one party might enquire thus: '*Just a smile from me in those days used to turn you on according to you but how come when I smile at you these days I don't notice the kind of bodily reactions I used to see?*' Or “*Are you seeing somebody else?*” Or '*Am I no longer attractive?*' If not properly handled, the scenario could precipitate a major quarrel in an otherwise healthy relationship because suspicion and trust issues have been introduced. So, what could have happened?

Those in love sometimes fail to cultivate “daily life as sexual spirituality” (Ellens, 2009 p. 24). By this, Ellens means a way of life that sustains and improves the interpersonal relationship of those with special relational bond which demands working to have 'congenial relationship' with one's lover every day. Developing a 'congenial relationship' causes the brain to produce another set of chemicals called 'endorphins'. Endorphins provide increased sense of “peace, tranquillity, and security” (p. 24). As long as a partner is alive and significant to one, the body can produce infinite chemicals for “enduring love.” So, while PEA might be gone, endorphins which sustain intimacy might have been produced. The tragedy is that those in so-called healthy relationships are so ignorant, busy, and unserious that they do not work to replace PEA with endorphins. For those that have reached the conjugal level, their sexual lives do not cause the brain to produce another bio-chemical called oxytocin. This is the chemical that prompts females to nuzzle babies and cuddle their significant others. Unserious and ignorant but well-intentioned lovers disconnect what they should not disconnect: “falling in love, being in love, passionately desiring to make love, and enduring in love for a life” are part of the chemical functions God created in us to sustain love-chemistry (p. 25). In order to sustain the love-chemistry, there must be “a constant overriding and

undergirding awareness of the mutuality of meaning we share.... And that is what enmeshes us with each other, spiritually and sexually” (p. 25).

Frankly, many get married today who have no business marrying yet. They are unaware, and too much in a hurry. They have not devoted considerable time for courtship during which PEA is gradually replaced with endorphins. Furthermore, many are too much in a hurry to get pregnant and 'make babies' due to cultural pressure before they reach the oxytocin level. If endorphins and oxytocin are not produced before marriage, it is a warning signal that sustained love for a lifetime might not be with the person one is 'crazy' about. Closely connected with this is the impact of the phenomenon of limerence, a state of high addiction in which people claim to be 'madly' in love (p. 25). This state is far disconnected from mundane life. It is an idolised, one-way obsession (madness). Unfortunately before this phase is over or transformed to a congenial one, some get married even in the Church. Conflicts happen because the ideal and fantasy meet reality (Ellens, 2009 pp. 26-27; Mitchell, 2003, pp. 199-201) by which time, it may be too late especially when the couples involved are already wedded in the Church.

Even if pastors do not feel comfortable going through the route of relational psychology, the Roman Catholic sexual ethics and conjugal morality have the useful insights articulated above.

4. Features of a healthy relationship in the Catholic tradition

There are some fundamental features of a healthy relationship, from the point of view of the Church's Theology of 'romantic' conjugal love (Edayodil, 2012). First, there is self-possession which implies that those in a healthy relationship remain in control of themselves while retaining their uniqueness, in freedom and responsibility without being under any compulsion to do and act out anything with their partners. Second, there is responsible love in which either party is accountable for the love given or received from the other which means the parties are not swayed about by all or any kind of emotions. Whatever happens in a healthy relationship, the parties do not make excuses but own up to their actions and consequences. Where one or all parties constantly evade(s) accountability and even liability, there is a toxic relationship (pp. 86-87). The third feature of a healthy relationship in view of marriage is love. Love is an abiding and firm commitment of emotion, mind, will, and action towards the good of the

beloved and their relationship. Love ensures that the parties in a healthy relationship relate with themselves as unique and valuable individuals and do not see the other as a means to a selfish end which is why in any healthy relationship in view of marriage, *love is “the basis of personhood that guides the sexual morality”* (p. 87).

The love between persons in a healthy relationship is characterised by the following descriptions: '*amorcomplacentia*', '*amorconcupiscentia*', '*amorbenevolentia*', as well as reciprocity, friendship, and betrothal (pp. 89-92). '*Amor complacentia*' (love as attraction) is a mutual attitude between the man and the woman who sees the beloved as a good in herself or himself. '*Amor concupiscentia*' (*love as desire*) is a state of genuine longing for the beloved as a human person, and not because she/he is a means to satisfying the lover's sensual desire or needs. *Amor concupiscentia* longs for the other in a way that means good to the desired, and not harm. In a healthy relationship, there is also '*amorbenevolentia*' (love as good will). This love is “fully human” because it is not ruled by instinct and sentiment. It moves the persons in this peculiar love relationship towards being one heart and soul “and together attain their human perfection” (*Humanae Vitae* § 9). In other words, in this relationship, there is a deliberate longing and commitment to live and work for the good of the other person and when the good is realised the lover is delighted. In other words, *one longs not just for the beloved as a good. One also longs for her/his good i.e. whatever that will make them develop their potentials and goals as unique and valuable human person.* Healthy relationship has reciprocal love. The lovers relate with themselves in an atmosphere of openness to each other's gifts and needs. This dimension of love makes the relationship durable and reliable because there is mutual trust which *protects healthy relationships from suspicion and jealousy* (Edayodil, p. 91). Crucially, a healthy relationship is based on friendship or has developed into friendship. Friends generally “desire and work for the good of each other” (p. 91). Friendship is an act of the will and not just sensual desire. We choose our friends and choose everyday to retain, nurture, protect and celebrate our friends and the friendship.

A healthy relationship is also characterised by 'betrothal'. Betrothal as used here and as experienced implies willingness and the actual letting go of oneself (surrender), and letting it into the hands and space of another person in view of marriage. This surrendering is necessary towards realizing one's full potential as a man or a woman. Betrothed love therefore

shows the direction which a love between a man and a woman should move towards. This finds fulfilment in marriage, and nurturing of a home together. This is why Blessed Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* says conjugal love is “total” because as a special kind of friendship those bound together in this relationship share everything with themselves “without undue reservations and selfish calculations (HV § 9). We can appreciate this point if we recognise that as human beings, we are not just material or psychical creatures. We are creatures with supernatural vocation. One of our vocations as persons is 'responsible parenthood'. This vocation is tied to the divine gift of marriage. This gift of conjugal love characterised by reciprocal self-gift is orientated to “the generation and education of new lives” (HV § 8). *A healthy relationship in view of marriage is faithful, exclusive and fecund*. It is part of love as responsible (HV § 9). In the light of these descriptions, we should now consider concrete pastoral care plans for those that *RelatioSynodi* §39 and 40 mention.

5. Enhancing healthy relationships in young families:

From ideals to pastoral care plans

The following takes inspiration from *RelatioSynodi's* stated expectations that local churches should provide pastoral care plans for engaged couples (RS 39) as well as young families who need accompaniment “beyond the actual celebration of the Sacrament” (RS 40). Such pastoral actions are divided along four heterosexual relationship periods corresponding with three phases of religious formation – single stage (*initial formation & discernment*), pre-engagement period & engagement phase (*direct formation & discernment*), and young family stage (*ongoing formation*).

5.1. Singles forum

To paraphrase the English saying at the beginning of this contribution, the eve of the wedding is not when to start talking about healthy relationships for the sake of the prospective family. At this stage the engaged couples are no longer open to taking long and hard look at some of the dynamics of healthy relationships and indicators for a happy marriage appraised then. Of course, many are married today who had no business getting married when they did because their relationships lacked the basic features of a healthy relationship. Nevertheless, the deficiency does not belong to them alone. The Churches have contributed to the lack of pastoral care plan targeting youths on the way towards marital life. The Catholic Church for instance has structures and programmes to foster the vocation to the

priesthood and religious life right from secondary school level. However, there is hardly any forum or programme for singles who are not considering the clerical or religious states. On the contrary, the youths who have marriage in mind are expected to get ready for marriage without any programme designed for them as they are expected to get their formation from home, the Catholic Youth Organisation meetings, and the homilies they constantly hear.

There is the need for pastoral initiatives for initial discernment. The initiatives under the term 'Singles Forum' should assist the youths with marriage in view to be aware of the signs of toxic relationships as against healthy ones. The forum should crucially help them acquire the skills of analyses (discernment) of any relationship they might be entering especially as they enter the 'dating' stage, from the post-secondary school stage, although some might even regard this as quite late, giving the fact that many of our youths today become romantically active early, sometimes before they get to eighteen years of age. Singles Forum should be at the parish level, and not just an ad hoc arrangement according to the discretion of the local pastors and the executives of various parish youth organisations. Some parishes, to their credit, only have a one-off 'Singles Forum' once in a while. There is no forum for ongoing conversations, enlightenment, and prayerful reflections as youths prepare to get deeper into the romantic relationships they hope might lead to marriage. There are several marriage counsellors today who in newspapers and on television screens are constantly educating singles on relationships and what to look out for. However, many of our youths do not reach such counsellors whose scientific and religious insights need to be stepped down and constantly reflected upon by the singles.

Singles Forum ought to be an exclusive forum meant for people with the same life goals with regard to vocation. Hence, it is insufficient to lump singles' issues under youth organisations' general issues. I was asked some questions some months ago, at a Catholic Youth Organisation's 'Singles Forum': 'how does one deal with compatibility issue? Allied to this, 'how does one break up politely?' 'How does one handle the tension between chastity and sexual attraction which is crucial for any long-lasting romantic heterosexual relationship?' Evidently, such questions cannot be adequately handled in one forum. The issues need to be processed by people of the same interest group ('*Single and Searching*') long before they reach the

betrothal stage. Many got entangled in toxic relationships or disastrous marriages due to lack of knowledge and discernment skills at their adolescent stage which is why 'Singles Forum' as an instance of *initial formation & discernment* should be a necessary part of pastoral care plan of a church that is interested in future healthy Christian marriages and families.

5.2. Pre-nuptial conversations and discernment

Singles transiting from the '*single and unattached*' state to '*single but attached*' one need particularly designed pastoral accompaniment. This formative stage of 'courtship' directly prepares them for a life of monogamous and exclusive relationship in view of marriage. A key moment during this phase is the customary 'Rites of Introduction' when courtship is formalised with the families of both parties getting involved (Bujo, 2009, pp. 99-103, 2012, pp. 5-6). This is the stage of direct discernment & formation, and proximate preparation for marriage. While this stage has some seriousness attached to it, it is not irreversible or indissoluble. Accordingly, the church being interested in healthy marriages and families must design an accompaniment plan for intending couples immediately after the 'Rites of Introduction'. The pastoral care programme at this stage is to promote frank though helpful 'pre-nuptial conversations'. There are specific questions and issues that are best handled at this stage, and not at the initial formation stage articulated above. If we return to the questions mentioned above, there are specific questions derived from them. For instance, 'How does one deal with specific compatibility issues with one's date?' 'What is the family baggage that parties are bringing into the relationship?' 'What are the indicators that their liaison will become a healthy marriage and family life?' 'What is their health status – genotype, HIV, hepatitis, fertility?' 'How do they break up or move on in case of undesirable medical results or incompatibilities?' These are questions asked in a context of monogamous and exclusive relationships in view of marriage.

This is the stage the church, at various local levels, profiting from recent researches on betrothal and marrying well, can offer such intending couples opportunities to explore family backgrounds and marriage models which if not explored and settled can be a source of marital breakdown in future. Many are unaware of their subconscious marriage models which influence their expectations and actions even at their courtship stage. According to Aina (2013, p. 221), there are six types of marital relationships – Authoritative, Nurturing, Equalising, Long Distance, Independent, and

Competitive. He continues, "Each of the relationships has its own 'Cultural roots', 'values and beliefs', 'communication styles', 'conflict resolution style', 'spoken & unspoken rules', 'use of power', 'potential relationship counselling problems', and possibilities for growth" (pp. 221-222).

Beyond these subconscious marriage models that need to be processed before intending couples reach direct preparation for marriage stage, they also need to be assisted to work through what Bruun and Ziff (2010) refer to as predictors of satisfying and stable marriages which if not attended to prior to solemnisation, could wreck a young family regardless of how serious or saintly the couples in it are. Some of the predictors are worth mentioning just to illustrate the extent of the need for 'pre-nuptial conversations,' facilitated through church's pastoral accompaniment: "A good sense of humour, commitment, communication skills, determination, education, fair fighting, flexibility, loyalty, which include prioritizing the couple as number one, respect for differences and trust" (p. 151). Beyond the individual predictors, there are about twenty couple predictors for a healthy marriage and family, like "openness; belief in the other's goodwill... similar background or appreciation of differences; life goals, values, and lifestyles; prioritizing the relationship; absence of addiction; extended family and friendships; managing conflict; sexual intimacy...knowledge of couple life stages and changing needs; friendship; financial security..." (pp. 175-176) which are personality traits of respective parties that bear on the trajectory of relationships and indicate what the parties can expect.

Additionally, there are questions marriage counsellors and clergy should ask as part of pre-nuptial conversations long before the intending couples get to the point of direct preparation for marriage. Some of these are: 'Where you will live?', 'Will you both be going off to work? Will either of you work from home? Do you plan to have children? If so, when? How many? Will that change any work and financial plans for either of you?'; 'What will you do - what do you do - when you disagree emphatically about something?' (Bruun & Ziff, 2010 pp. 153-155). These questions are designed to enlighten the intending parties about themselves and their partners. Some do not bother to ask these questions at the discernment stage because they believe rather naively that their love can triumph over any challenge. Unfortunately, when the storms come later, the married couple lacks the knowledge and skills to deal with them. (Bruun & Ziff, 2010 p. 175). Kellerman (2009) insightfully argues that "love is affected by various

things” and these “make it so that love is not ever really enough to make a relationship work” (p. xi). Healthy and satisfying relationships that lead to a happy marriage and family life do not simply happen. Intending couples must learn to work through their differences very early if they wish to reach that point of happy married life.

If the intending couples' differences, however, are so incompatible and they acknowledge the impossibility of having a healthy future as married couples and family, they have more freedom at this stage to end the relationship unlike the present practice where some of the pre-nuptial conversations happen, if at all they do, during the mandatory 3-6months 'marriage counselling' sessions that are more like direct preparation for marriage. At this stage, even if the intending couples discover these compatibility issues, it is more difficult for them to end the relationship because they have already committed themselves, up to the point of being customarily or civilly married. Many continue with the sacramental marriage though with impeded matrimonial consent, rendering their unions putatively invalid.

5.3. Marriage ncounter weekends

In the light of RS 40 on the early years of marriage as crucial for the success of any young family, pastoral care programmes should help young couples reorient themselves to make their marriages work. Ideally, people get married for love, though there are other reasons. Once they get married, regardless of the reason(s), the 'why' pales is insignificant to “*what they do once they get there*” (Kellerman, 2009 p. 4). If there is anything needed at this stage, it is creating the atmosphere and possibilities for getting closer. I was asked recently, 'Why it is that people are better as friends, but once they begin to date, boredom sets in?' If boredom sets in during the dating stage, what about during the early years of marriage? If we go by Ellens (2009)'s observation about the chemistry of love in relation to experience of boredom and distaste for routine, many couples risk marital breakdown. So, to avoid separation/divorce that normally happens during the first decade of marriage (Bruun & Ziff, 2010 pp. 6-7; Mitchell, 2003 pp. 199-201), there is the need for concrete pastoral care plans for newlyweds and young families. Effiong (2008) calls this “*marital mystagogy*” when “the continued education and learning could be offered” which includes not just spiritual matters but “personal and social relationships, economic, and other practical things of married life” (p. 272). Aina (2013) rightly observes that in

pre-Christian African societies, many communities had mentoring system for newly wedded women and men, mentored by married women and men respectively.

In view of the foregoing, religious communities today should have mentoring spaces for newlyweds by offering them periodic 'Encounter Weekends' where they can keep their nuptial conversations going which is akin to ongoing formation. At this stage, religious communities can facilitate couples whose marriages are between the ages of one and seven so they can explore some questions and issues that they are confronting like "Do they talk, and listen to one another? ...Do they express their dissatisfaction to one another? ...Are they able to repair difficulties with one another? And most importantly, can they remember that *each negative element of the relationship is far less significant than the ongoing underlying history of the relationship* – its continuity and the whole process of the thing?" (Kellerman, S2009 pp. 4-5). These questions around personality differences pop up even in the early days of married life, sometimes before the birth of the first child. The newlyweds can be sources of strength for one another at this stage. It can also provide the opportunity for mentoring by older happily married couples. (Aina, 2013 p. 231) advises on how to spot changing dynamics long before the '*tsunami* of breakdown' appears on the horizon. In a sense, one can say this proposal serves as early warning mechanism against forces and tendencies that can distract young families' commitment to create "relationships of self-giving and creative reciprocity, which are empowering and supportive like those within a family" (RS 9). Ongoing discernment at this stage is indispensable for realising healthy relationships in young families as exhorted by the Synod Fathers.

6. Conclusion

This contribution has shown that to face squarely 'the pastoral challenges of young families in the context of evangelisation' (cf. Synod's theme), we need to develop 'marriage catechumenate' which accompany different relationship stages (Baur, 1994, pp. 331-332). The church's marriage catechumenate as proposed in this article demonstrates respect accorded to the values discovered in our indigenous rites of relationship passages which then become components of remote, proximate and direct preparations for marriage and family life. If realised, this will be a practical theological reception of *Relatio Synodi* regarding pastoral preparation and accompaniment of engaged couples and young families. Hopefully, the

vision expressed in the foregoing pages shall find echoes during the forthcoming XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World*.

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