

Family Accompaniment, a Cultural Challenge for Our Time

Montserrat Gas Aixendri*Institute for Advanced Family Studies International University of Catalonia. Barcelona (Spain)*

The health of a society is directly linked to the strength of its families, since they are the primary place where love, solidarity and responsibility towards others are learned. The family is not only a private entity; it transcends the individual and has an impact on the common good, making it irreplaceable in the building up of a just society. The family also acts as an element of resistance in the face of the growing fragmentation and cultural crises in today's world.

Since the second half of the last century, our understanding of the family has deepened significantly. Today, for example, we value more highly the importance of personal love and freedom in conjugal relationships, as well as the equal dignity and responsibility of women and men within the family. But at the same time, paradoxically, people's lives seem to have become unmoored from their deepest anthropological foundations, losing sight of the human being's vocation to establish lasting bonds of communion with others, going out of oneself. Many countries (especially in the West, with a far-reaching influence on the rest of the world) live under a "tyranny of artificiality,"^[1] where laws try to redefine what a family is according to the reigning ideologies. We are immersed in what could be called an "anthropological blackout," marked by a greatly impoverished understanding of the human being's nature and destiny. Benedict XVI referred to this reality as an "educational emergency,"^[2] seen in the growing difficulty to transmit to new generations the fundamental values of human existence.

Cultural challenges of the family

Along with the above challenge, it is worth noting the rapidity with which contemporary society has been changing in recent decades. The life-

styles of individuals and families are very different today from even just twenty or thirty years ago. For example, the explosion of technology in homes is changing family relationships. Smartphones make it possible to be physically present but mentally and emotionally absent, with each person immersed in his or her own separate world. Another important change has to do with the full incorporation of women into the labor market and the implementation of equality policies, which are not only influencing the approach to reconciling work and family life, but are also transforming the dynamics of families themselves. Today, the difference between being a woman and being a man tends to become blurred. It is harder to see their positive aspects, as complementary elements that can enrich the relationship between men and women. And the so-called “new paternity” is a reality in many places, with men who are more involved in the home and in raising the children. At the same time, younger mothers and fathers are often eager to rediscover the true relationship between men and women.^[3]

The current context calls for a change in the way we look at the family, seeking a way to help families in accord with the new mentality and circumstances. Postmodern culture is characterized, among other things, by the belief that human beings are sufficient in themselves and do not need others to achieve fulfillment. One of the main consequences of this approach is loneliness. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us, this is one of the worst diseases in today’s world, since God did not make us for solitude, but for communion.^[4] The first account of creation states that “it is not good that the man should be alone” (*Gen2:18*). In the context of a personalist anthropology, the notion of accompaniment has been gaining ground for some decades now. God has willed that people reach their fullness through encounters with others. The human person lives “from others,” which implies being accompanied; and also “for others,” which implies accompanying. The men and women of our time, more than ever, need to discover that we are destined to accompany and to be accompanied.^[5]

The loneliness that the human person experiences in a radical way is a loneliness that now also affects families. Just as we can affirm that it is not good for man to be alone, we could also say that it is not good for families to be alone, and hence that they need to be accompanied. The starting point for understanding the importance of family accompaniment today is a clear

knowledge of the cultural context that families are facing and that is spreading globally. Carlo Caffarra, a great promoter of the need for a new family culture,^[6] pointed to the need to “remove the “cataracts of ideologies” that are blinding people today and to rediscover the “original truth about the family.”^[7] That is, we need to identify the elements of postmodern culture that have progressively cast doubt on the solid foundations of family relationships.

The first of these “ideological cataracts” is a pessimistic view of the family, often perceived as a burden for personal and professional advancement, or with little chance of success. Thus difficulties and crises in family life are no longer seen as a normal part of growth in personal relationships, but as pathologies or failures. Difficulties that arise in family life and in the relationship between spouses and that in the past we seen as “growth crises,” are today viewed as imperative reasons for rupture. But experience shows that the main causes leading to family break-up today are not in fact irreparable.

A large part of this anthropological pessimism comes from the tendency to present an “ideal model” of the family that does not exist in reality.^[8] What we find in the real world are people of flesh and blood, with limitations and imperfections, who try to live their family vocation as best they know how to and can.^[9] It is necessary, therefore, to start from an understanding of what real families are like and what they need, and to recover an optimistic and hopeful outlook in the face of the difficulties involved today in moving forward with the family project, trusting in the intrinsic strength of family bonds and offering close and realistic models.

Along with pessimism, we also need to eliminate the “cataract” of individualism. In many places today we see a social context in which the human person is understood as essentially independent and self-sufficient. This individualistic outlook implies ignorance, both intellectually and in practice, of the truth of the human person as a “family being,” called into existence by love and destined for love through the sincere gift of oneself.^[10] This leads to an unconscious rejection of the importance of relationships for each person’s integral development and happiness. It also makes it difficult to accept the dependence and vulnerability that every human relationship entails.

This individualism is deeply present in our forms of daily life today. No one is unaffected by its influence. Even in many families that have not accep-

ted it as a theoretical presupposition, individualistic ways of life, deeply contrary to the essence of family love, have been adopted, sometimes unconsciously. Thus it is not uncommon, for example, to see in married couples – especially those who are younger – an objective difficulty in drawing up a shared project in life. Many see their marriage as based on “their own individuality.” It is viewed as an addition to their own being, which can improve their personal life and perhaps make them happy, without understanding that marriage is a “co-biographical” project that requires the mutual self-giving and acceptance of the spouses.

Some specific manifestations of this mentality can be observed today in not a few homes where there is hardly any sharing of common times in family life. Little importance is given to meal times spent together or to family celebrations. The spouses often develop parallel professional and social relationships; they don’t share friends, or even material goods. And thus an authentic community of life and love becomes difficult or almost impossible. In short, it becomes difficult to understand the importance of bonds, which constitute the foundational pillars of the family.^[11] To all this we should add the obstacle of the lack of tools to communicate the truth about the family. It is still common to use a voluntarist language to explain the process of loving, a language that is difficult to understand today, especially for young people who “reason with their emotions” more than with their intellect.^[12]

Formation and the style of accompaniment

The educational emergency to strive to pass on to the new generations the fundamental values of human existence^[13] calls for a serious reflection on the need to form young people with a methodology and style in keeping with today’s culture. Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has stressed the need to accompany families closely in realistic way.^[14] Until a few years ago, it might have been enough to offer families a formation that involved above all giving or receiving information. But integral formation requires the freedom that enables each person – each family – to discover their unique responsibility. Clearly it is still important to give people the information they need, but today this is no longer sufficient.

The document *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, from the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, addresses the method of formation for

families and stresses that it is not merely a matter of “sharing notions or imparting skills.” Rather, it is about “guiding, assisting, and being close to couples along a path to walk together.”^[15] The document refers to the need for a formation that involves accompanying families closely. Accompaniment is seen as a “style” (that is, a way of acting based more on life than on concepts) that needs to be learned. Hence those who accompany people “should possess a formation and style of accompaniment suited to the catechumenal journey.” In reference to accompaniment, terms such as “gradual,” “welcoming,” “supportive,” “offering witness,” and “being there for them throughout the journey” are used, stressing the need to create an “atmosphere of friendship and trust.” The overall “tone” to be used in accompaniment “should move beyond a ‘moralistic appeal’ and should tend instead toward one that is purposeful, persuasive, encouraging and fully oriented to emphasizing the good and beautiful aspects of married life.”^[16] This is a good starting point that calls for further development in order to show, in practice, what it means to accompany families in the Church.^[17]

St. Paul VI once said that “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”^[18] The Prelate of Opus Dei, Fernando Ocáriz, quoted this text, adding that “in today’s culture, we need faces that make a message credible.”^[19] The prototype for all accompaniment is Jesus’ interaction with the disciples from Emmaus, totally transforming their lives.^[20] Accompaniment is an intrinsic requirement of Christian love; it is not a strategy or a method, but a participation in “the very strength of the Holy Spirit, uncreated Charity,”^[21] because Christ wants to accompany every person and he does so through Christians.^[22]

What does it mean to accompany?

To accompany means, etymologically, to share space and time with other people. The term comes from the Latin *cum-panis*, which means to share bread with someone or share a meal together. Thus it points to sharing in someone’s life through daily events.^[23] The essence of accompaniment lies in the conscious decision to support another person, without trying to impose oneself or control others, respecting their autonomy. We can highlight here four essential aspects of the action of accompanying that can help us to better understand its meaning and scope:

1) Accompanying requires *being present* with someone. Accompaniment is carried out mainly in places where families meet and are present. That is to say, in schools, associations, places of leisure or rest, etc.

2) Accompanying implies *establishing a bond*. Accompaniment is impossible without bonding with others and making oneself vulnerable through that bond. This is the anthropological foundation of accompaniment.^[24] Therefore accompaniment should not be confused with a tactic, with a methodology for carrying out successful programs, or a resource to solve other people's problems. Accompanying consists in establishing a personal relationship based on trust, which cannot be imposed but only offered to others.

3) To accompany someone is not to "direct" them, or to make decisions for them, trying to solve their problems. In past years, in order to help families it was often seen as enough to offer some ideas on how to do things, with a style that we could call "directive." Perhaps we have sometimes forgotten the essential role of freedom in people's formation. Besides teaching others how to act, accompanying requires helping people to discover their own resources for solving difficulties.

4) Finally, accompaniment *is not something needed only for moments of crisis*. Rather it should be seen as a help for being prepared when situations of conflict inevitably arise. In every family, moments will come when difficulties are accentuated or the family goes through especially trying circumstances. Thus accompanying requires starting from the premise that a crisis is not necessarily an irreparable failure. Crises are always a threat, but they are also a challenge and an opportunity to grow, to renew oneself and discover new facets in people and relationships.

The Church as a "space" for accompaniment

The need for family accompaniment is an urgent call addressed to everyone, especially those in the Church. As Pope Francis has stressed, the Church wants to reach out to families so that they can discover the best way to overcome the difficulties they encounter on their life journey.^[25] As we said above, accompaniment does not consist in carrying out effective programs, but in realizing that God doesn't want anyone to feel alone, which is the fundamental mission of the Church.^[26] The Gospel has been passed on to us through witnesses, through other people who have accompanied us in our

own life. Moreover, the first evangelization took place in the *domus ecclesiae*, in the domestic churches as the place of welcome for Christians, where they found a family environment. The pastoral care of the family sometimes seems to be limited to offering a series of “spiritual services,” when in reality the faithful need, above all, credible points of reference and spaces in which to share the faith. St. John Paul II understood very well that it was not enough to tell couples what to do: one has to accompany them closely. That is why he created a group of couples (*Środowisko*), as an effective “environment” for accompaniment, seeking to share time with them; and in this shared space they learned a lot from each other. In order to accompany people effectively, the Church needs to show clearly that it is a family.[27]

Opus Dei, as part of the Church, is an instrument willed by God to accompany persons and families on their journey of Christian life. St. Josemaría’s teachings highlight various elements that are clearly in harmony with the essence of accompaniment. In the first place, St. Josemaría understood that the Work is a small family within the great family of the Church. A family spirit is deeply rooted in the heart of the spirit and ways of evangelization proper to Opus Dei. The experience of being a family makes it possible for us to accompany one another by creating authentic personal bonds of trust among the faithful of the Work. Moreover, the consideration of the Work as a family is one of the keys to interpreting St. Josemaría’s teachings about the formation it gives, and more specifically about spiritual accompaniment.[28] In a certain way, all the means of formation, and the fraternal relationship between the members of the Work and the people who take part in its apostolates, are a form of family accompaniment. The atmosphere of friendship and fraternity generated in these activities fosters personal and spiritual growth, and strengthens family relationships. At the same time, this same atmosphere can and should spread to other broader circles where families accompany one another in seeking spiritual and human growth.

At the beginning of the new millennium, St. John Paul II stressed that all apostolic initiatives arising in the future would be “mechanisms without a soul” if they failed to center their efforts on sincerely loving all men and women. Hence the importance “to share in their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.”[29] St. Josemaría found in the Gospel a way of doing apostolate based

on personal relationships.[30] His teachings on friendship and trust shed light on the real meaning of Christian accompaniment. “In a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity are one and the same thing. They are a divine light which spreads warmth.”[31] St. Josemaría understands friendship as a sincere relationship that is “face to face, heart to heart.”[32] “By divine vocation, you live in the midst of the world, sharing with other men and women, who are just like yourselves, joys and sorrows, efforts and dreams, desires and adventures People need, we all need, my daughters and sons, to lean on one another, in order to travel along the path of life, to turn our hopes into reality, to overcome difficulties, to enjoy the fruit of our efforts. Hence the enormous importance, not only human but also divine, of friendship.”[33]

The family is the first place for accompaniment, and its natural environment *par excellence*. The task of Christian spouses is to accompany each other and their children on the path of life. This perspective implies a change of mentality in the approach to family education. This is not so much a matter of “doing things,” but of truly sharing in others’ lives. The family is *adomestic church* to the extent that it can carry out this Christian accompaniment for its members, ensuring that no one feels alone. Moreover, the family is accompanied and is capable of accompanying when it itself becomes aware of its own vocation: to be, as a communion of persons, a light for the world.[34] St. Josemaría has been a decisive instrument for the rediscovery of the Christian vocation in and through family life, helping us to understand that the personal bonds that form the family are an authentic way of encountering God. “Husband and wife are called to sanctify their married life and to sanctify themselves in it. It would be a serious mistake if they were to exclude family life from their spiritual development. The marriage union, the care and education of children, the effort to provide for the needs of the family as well as for its security and development, the relationships with other persons who make up the community, all these are among the ordinary human situations that Christian couples are called upon to sanctify.”[35]

The family is the natural environment for each person to grow and mature; it is a school of love and the “system” it uses to teach this is sharing in the life of others, through the family relationships themselves.[36] Knowing that one is loved unconditionally is the best method for learning how to truly give oneself, which is so unfamiliar to men and women today. The love

between the husband and wife, which is the foundation of the family, is also the best remote preparation for the children to embark on their own marriage journey.^[37]

St. Josemaría refers to family accompaniment when he assures us that parents are the principal educators of their children. They do so, above all, by knowing how to love them and give good example, since they educate primarily by their own conduct. What sons and daughters look for in their father or mother is not only knowledge or sound advice, but a witness to the value and meaning of sharing life as a married couple. The founder of Opus Dei encouraged parents to be friends of their children, so that they feel confident in entrusting to them their concerns and speaking about their problems, receiving from them affection and helpful advice. Therefore parents need to find time to spend with their children and to talk with them,^[38] always with respect for their legitimate freedom. “Parents have to be on guard against the temptation of wanting to project themselves unduly on their children or of molding them according to their own preferences. They should respect their individual God-given inclinations and aptitudes. If their love is true, this is easy enough. Even in the extreme case, when a young person makes a decision that the parents have good reason to consider mistaken and when they think it will lead to future unhappiness, the answer lies not in force, but in understanding. Very often it consists in knowing how to stand by their children so as to help them overcome the difficulties and, if necessary, draw all the benefit possible from an unfortunate situation.”^[39].

Families accompanying other families

St. Josemaría often referred to the example of the early Christians, especially families whose life was founded on Christ and who made Christ known to those around them: “small Christian communities which were centers for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what we have to be: sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us.”^[40] These teachings have given rise to numerous initiatives all over the world. Among them, for example, are schools promoted by families.^[41] Family accompaniment has a special importance for these educational endeavors. On the one hand, these centers are a strong support for

families, helping them to rediscover their primary role as educators and fostering an integral family formation. In addition, the school can offer support to families so that their children not only succeed professionally, but also so that they are able to successfully carry out a much more important role: forming a family. At the same time, the school is a natural environment where families can accompany other families.

The family orientation courses are another noteworthy initiative, offering formation, counseling and practical support to married couples. These courses seek to strengthen family unity through dialogue and mutual understanding, making possible the forming of homes capable of radiating Christian values in society. These and other initiatives, such as family associations, are “spaces” in which accompaniment among families can take place.

Family accompaniment should not be seen as simply a “method” or an activity, but rather as a broad deepening of perspective, which can be carried out in very diverse areas and implemented in very different ways, depending on the situation of the families, the network of their relationships, etc. Since there are no ideal or perfect families, in reality we all need to be accompanied. Each person can find ways to accompany others in their daily life through small deeds, which always bear fruit. Although this effort may seem daunting given the general atmosphere of family failure and divorce today, the example of a few truly dedicated families can have a widespread impact on the society around them. Just as the bad culture of family failure was not imposed by ideas but by practices (bad practices, we could say), a genuine family culture must be rebuilt more with good practices – with lifestyles – than with abstract ideas.

In the future many other initiatives for the family will undoubtedly continue to arise, the fruit of Christian creativity and charity. Inspired by the teachings of St. Josemaría, these initiatives will seek to be meeting places for families, where they feel accompanied and in turn are able to accompany many other families.

[1] Carlo Caffarra, “Fede e cultura di fronte al matrimonio,” in H. Franceschi (Ed.), *Matrimonio e famiglia. La questione antropologica*, EDUSC, Roma, 2015, p. 26.

[2] Benedict XVI, *Address* at the inauguration of the work of the diocesan assembly of Rome, 11 June 2007.

[3] Cf. Pierpaolo Donati, *Manual de sociología de la familia*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2003, pp.121-156.

[4] Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (29 June 2009), no. 53.

[5] Accompaniment can take place in various fields (spiritual, therapeutic, educational, etc.). This article applies to the specific field of the family and family relationships.

[6] Carlo Caffarra (Italy, 1938-2017), an Italian cardinal who was an expert in the moral theology of family life. At the Pope's request, in 1981 he founded and presided over the John Paul II Pontifical Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family.

[7] Carlo Caffarra, *Fede e cultura di fronte al matrimonio*, cit. p. 27.

[8] As Pope Francis emphasized, there is no "stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems." Francis, Apostolic Exhortation. *Amoris laetitia* (19 March 2016), no. 57.

[9] In fact, "many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way." Ibid.

[10] Cf. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), no. 11.

[11] Cf. Montserrat Gas-Aixendri; M. Pilar Lacorte Tierz, *La familia quale realtà originaria: mostrare, educare, accompagnare*, in H. Franceschi (Ed.), *Matrimonio e famiglia*, cit. pp. 290-291.

[12] Cf. Ibid., p.301.

[13] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Discourse* 11 June 2007, cit.

[14] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, no. 208.

[15] Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life., *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life. Pastoral guidelines for the particular Churches*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2022, no. 20.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Cf. Ibid.

[18] St. Paul VI, *Addressto* the members of the *Consilium de Laicis*, 2 October 1974.

[19] Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 18.

[20] *Lk* 24:13-35.

[21] Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9.

[22] Cf. Juan José Pérez-Soba, “¿Qué tipo de acompañamiento familiar abre una esperanza?”, *Quaderns de Polítiques Familiars*, vol. 8 (2022).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, no. 200.

[26] Cf. Juan José Pérez-Soba, ¿*Qué tipo de acompañamiento familiar abre una esperanza*, cit.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Cf. Guillaume Derville, “Dirección espiritual,” in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer* (coord. José Luis Illanes), Monte Carmelo - Instituto Histórico San Josemaría Escrivá, Burgos 2013, p. 339.

[29] St. John Paul III, Apostolic Letter. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 6, 2001), no. 43.

[30] Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9; St. Josemaría, *Letter* 1, no. 11.

[31] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 565.

[32] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 191.

[33] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 October 1965, nos. 2 and 16.

[34] Juan José Pérez-Soba, *El arte de acompañar, una luz para la familia*, address given at the *II Jornadas sobre acompañamiento familiar*, organized by the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Barcelona, 4 May 2024, *pro manuscript*.

[35] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 23.

[36] Cf. Blessed Alvaro DelPortillo, “La famiglia, vera scuola dell’amore,” [The Family, True School of Love. Commentary on the Letter to Families], *Avvenire*, 24-02-1994.

[37] Cf. Aquilino Polaino-Lorente, *Familia y autoestima*, Ariel, Madrid, 2004, p. 106.

[38] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 27-28.

[39] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 104.

[40] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 30.

[41] These schools “are of interest first for the parents, then for the teachers, and then for the students,” because “the first ‘business’ for any family should be the children themselves.” St. Josemaría, *Notes taken at a get-together*, 21 November 1972. Text quoted by Bishop Javier Echevarría in the address *The Family in the Teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, given the closing of the International Conference on Family and Society at the International University of Catalonia (Barcelona, 17 May 2008).

[Back to Contents](#)