

CHALLENGES OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

In the Year of Youth and in the Context of *Chavarul*

Benny Joseph Mukalel CMI

Abstract: The challenges of children, youth and families, seen in the context of the Year of Youth and in the light of *Chavarul*, a holy legacy that Chavara has left for his people, which presents a vision of the family, which surpasses its historical context, are great. Drawing inspiration from the procedural methodology of the Synod on the Family, the challenges made by the *Chavarul* are seen in the light of *Amoris Laetitia*; oneself and the society are judged in the light of the Word and religious institutions act in the path of mercy in order to become centres of family ministry.

Keywords: Religious, spirituality, family, youth, children, ministry, *Chavarul*, Chavara, liberation theology, divorce, pornography, consumerism, poverty, alcoholism, drug, addiction, gender discrimination, violence, patriarchal society, youth, unity, co-existence, justice, children, conscience, altruism, egotism, social networks, cyber world, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, procreation, homosexuals, digital world, digital continent, vocation, fidelity, parenting, counsellors, value education, religious education, sex education.

1. Introduction

Yuval Noah Harari is a historian-author with two recently published, much discussed books titled *Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. In the first book, he speaks about three revolutions through which man evolved into the present stage. (1) The Cognitive Revolution (evolution of imagination starting from 70000 BC), (2) The Agricultural Revolution (development of agriculture starting from 10000 BC), and (3) Scientific Revolution (emergence of objective science from 1500 AD). The first two, humans have already been through, while the third one is on. In the first stage,

human beings were close cousins of others in the animal kingdom. Humans became markedly superior to them when distinctive cognitive capacity developed in them. This capacity helped them to believe in things existing purely in imagination. Today we live in a phase of our evolution where the imagined realities like nations, corporations, etc. are more real than the objective realities like rivers, trees and lions.

In his second book, *Homo Deus* Harari predicts that the rapid progress in information technology will usher in the next phase of human evolution, namely, the advent of Homo Deus. Collection and networking of information data will decide the values and power in this stage. In the first three stages Homo Sapiens conquered and controlled the world but in Homo Deus, Homo Sapiens will lose control through the advancement of technology. Technology will perform in far more superior fashion all the functions that humans perform now. For example, super computers will also be super doctors who can scan not only our body but also our mind. With this, new threshold of developments will be crossed, and goals like immortality will be achieved. Harari predicts that once technology is able to re-engineer human minds, it will become a monster and we will have created a world where we will have no place. It is like Dan Brown's super intelligence called Winston in his new novel *Origin*, which dictates and controls human intelligence and by 2050 there will be no more humans but a superior creature, which will take hold of the world.

We will have to wait and see what turn our technological progress will take in the years to come. However, it is deeply worrying to see that there are very dangerous possibilities open. We are in a world where technology is taking dominance in all walks of life, all aspects of life. This can happen to the religious life too; or it has already started to show its symptoms. It happens when our priorities are shifted. If the shifting of priorities has happened, it can very well override the original priorities for which the Congregation came into existence. It is in this world and against the background of our failure that we try to make our existence as religious and our spirituality relevant to meet and respond to the challenges faced by family, youth and children.

Family is the basic unit of the society and the Church. The Church considers family as the 'domestic church.' Hence the vocation and mission of the family, and ministry to the family, children and youth are important concerns of the Church.

The Church and society as a whole are becoming more profoundly aware of the challenges faced by the families, children and youth. The Church has been responding to these challenges, especially in the last few decades. The Synods of 2014 and 2015 on Family and the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, and the synod of 2018 on "Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment," are the latest examples. This also demands us to make a critical evaluation of our response as religious communities to the challenges faced by families, children and youth, and to make a renewed commitment in our ministry.

One of the four thrusts identified by the 37th CMI General Synaxis is: *Renewal of Families after the Model of St. Chavara*. This is because St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a champion of families and his last testament to his parish community is a great treatise for effective family life. The CMI Prior General in his promulgation letter of GS 37 encourages the members to 'enhance our pastoral acumen' to address the 'genuine concerns of the families' (Promulgation Letter Acts of 37th CMI General Synaxis, p. 10). In the vision statement of GS 37 we find an invitation to reorient our pastoral programs to strengthen the youth and children (GS 37, Vision Statement, no. 64).

Chavarul, though written 150 years ago, presents a vision of the family, which surpasses its historical context. It is a source of inspiration for ministry today. Moreover, as it is a 'Testament' of a loving father, it demands a special concern and commitment from us in the care of families, youth and children. It contains 40 guidelines for the family and the last 16 of them especially pertain to the formation of children and youth. It is a holy legacy that Chavara has left for his people. He instructed his people: "This script will not perish even when I am dead and gone... Let this be a mark of the fact that you are my successors... On the first Saturday of every month, all of you shall come together and read it; this shall be a commemoration of my death anniversary; there is nothing else you need to do to remember me." These words of our St. Chavara show how vitally he considered this testament. He knew that the content of this testament would surpass any age, any circumstance and any situation. It will become an elixir of life.

Showing its importance to modern families, Subhash Chandra, the literary critic says: "I am not sure whether among the miracles that were reported to Rome in the process of making Blessed Chavara a Saint this little document was there or not. Most probably not as all the other miracles were mainly medical in character. However, it is

Chavarul like innumerable surprises that distinguish St. Chavara different from other saints.

2. Methodology

During the Synod on the Family, the procedural methodology followed was, “see-judge-act.” It was the same methodology that was adopted by the liberation theologians earlier. This is also very much Pope Francis’ methodology found in most of his teachings. In *seeing*, one understands the reality, the challenges, or ‘reads the signs of the times.’ To understand what is happening around us, information from social sciences, different reports, survey results, statistical analysis, etc. are helpful. The act of seeing leads us to the act of *judging*. What is seen need not become the norm. We have to evaluate them in light of the Word; or, we have to judge ‘looking to Jesus’. *Action* is our response to the seen and judged reality today. The action can be different from the past, since the reality or the context has changed. Although we keep the ideal in our sight, we have to also realize that the ideal may not be realized in its fullness in the given context. This does not mean that we have to compromise the ideal, but that we accept human limitation with mercy.

3. Seeing the Challenges in the light of *Amoris Laetitia* and *Chavarul*

The current challenges faced by families, children and youth according to Synodal document *Amoris Laetitia*¹ are individualism with distorted notions of freedom, dwindling of faith seen in separation and divorce in marriage, pornography especially seen in the misuse of the internet, addiction to social network which impedes affective immaturity, consumerism versus poverty. alcoholism, drug addiction, gender discrimination, violence on women which is seen in the commercialization of the female body, decline in the number of children, sexual exploitation of children (‘a scandalous and perverse reality of today’) and families with disabled/differently abled children, where also the elderly are lonely and abandoned.

The Vision Statement of GS 37, no. 64 notes: “The rising atrocities against women, gang rapes, trafficking of women and children, marital breakups and domestic violence, increasing number of divorces, etc., are symptoms of erosion of values in Christian families and in the larger society.” Similarly, many studies and reports indicate that in recent decades, especially from mid-1990s, there is a radical

¹Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §§31-57.

change in the attitude, lifestyle and value perception regarding family and sexuality. The preparatory document for the upcoming Synod identifies the following challenges faced by the youth today, such as unemployment, economic inequality, gender inequality, vocational discernment and digital world.

We are invited to read the *Chavarul* in the context of the various challenges that the families, youth and children are facing today. In order to see the reality of our world today in the light of *Chavarul*, first we need to read it in the light of the socio-cultural background in which it was written. *Chavarul* was written in a society which had the following socio-cultural and political features:

- Patriarchal society dominated and supported by conventions and traditions
- A period that ushered in a lot of renewal and restorations in many socio-cultural and political areas.
- Anxiety and uncertainty prevailed in moral and religious beliefs and practices.
- When *Chavarul* speaks about the need of love, humanity, peaceful co-existence, hard work, helping others, readiness to forgive and ask for forgiveness, fight for justice, fear of God, reading good books and spiritual books, we come to know what were the ills and evils that were present in the society.
- *Chavarul* depicts a society where though people are related by blood, there were deficiencies of love; though people lived as members in the family, there were shortage of understanding between people. These created split leading to in-fights, court cases, etc.
- *Chavarul* points to the prevalence of a tendency towards pompous, extravagant, idle and luxurious life and lack of openness and unjust behaviour.
- *Chavarul* shows tendency towards profanity and lack of religiosity among the youth.

It is in this background that St. Chavara designs this testament to bring back love, unity, peaceful co-existence and justice. It asks in that era to respect the freedom of youth and their freedom to choose any walk of life. He advises the parents to be careful about the tendency among children and youth to tell lies. 'Beware and be alert' are the three watchwords with which *Chavarul* admonishes the parents about training their children.

We need to read *Chavarul* with today's society in mind.

- We live in a society where families are broken and children are not adequately cared for.
- Today the society is guided by special philosophies encouraged by globalization, individualism, dangerous egoism and consumerism. These things have greatly influenced and damaged our children and youth.
- Generally, one's words do correlate with one's actions; only it seems to do so. The general expectation is that one should look good and no reference is to be made to one's conscience.
- Today, cleverness consists in taking advantage from the labour of others. Today's real estate business techniques, marketing techniques and other instant profit yielding business techniques teach our children and youth a life style that encourages this cleverness.
- Love today is an opium that kills your will to struggle against the odds. Hatred is encouraged as it brings out the best from you to thrive at any cost.
- The leading principle today is 'me and myself'. Do not be too close to anybody; not even to your parents and if at all you are close to anybody that should be to your advantage; make a relationship only if it profits you.
- Love, mercy and sympathy are taken as illusions. These values make you look weak. Love has degenerated to lust. Altruism has given way to egotism.
- Things are more important than persons. Persons are important if they satisfy your needs.
- Owner's pride is neighbour's envy. Shut yourself from others so that the other will not disturb your free world. In a selfie culture, we do not want others and we easily disown others and others' needs.
- Your strength lies in fighting and not in giving in. The society is guided by greed and gluttony.
- Extravagance and pompous life is to be lived at any cost, even with money taken on a loan. *A Family Meditates on the Railway Track* by U. K. Kumaran beautifully portrays today's attitude very well.² It is

²The story is of a family sitting on a railway track to commit suicide. Several trains pass by but they do not get into the track. The youngest one in the group asks his father: "Are we not here to commit suicide? Then why don't we do it when the trains come?" The father replies: "The trains that have

what poet Sylvia Plath means when she says 'Dying is an art and I do it exceptionally well.'

- Today's society is marked by anxiety and uncertainty. There is wide spread uncertainty and exploitation in job. The refugees and migrants are on the rise.
- Education today does not make people open, humble and human oriented. Albert Einstein's formula is re-written today. $E=MC^2$ is Education = money, career and chair. Education encourages cut throat competition and this has led children and youth to adopt a lot of illegal means to thrive in examinations. Malpractices in schools, colleges and university exams are very rampant and are on the rise. Education leads children into the battle fields of school and colleges and the motto is 'win at any cost'.
- Educational institutions encourage competence and excellence and they have replaced human values. Excellence has replaced love and co-existence. Live and let live now is live and let not the other live.
- Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., have created an intoxicating world for our youth and children.
- Cyber world has become the world of the youth. This has brought in a lot of diseases especially related to sexual promiscuity.
- A survey conducted on Sex in Marriage by *India Today* in 2007 made the following findings: Those who watch porn with their spouse are 39%, 79% use contraceptives, 18% have had extra-marital affair, 23% of working women have affairs with their colleagues.³
- According to a report, 11,667 cases of divorce were filed in Mumbai in 2014.
- The honourable Supreme Court has legalized homosexuality.
- According to National Crime Records Bureau, 338,954 crimes were committed against women in one year.
- Maharashtra topped the list in crimes against children with 27500 pending cases under POCSO Act in 2015. Around 17300 cases were registered under POCSO from 2017 to February 2018.⁴

4. Judging in the Light of the Word

In the *Chavarul*, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara presents a beautiful vision of family based on the biblical vision. "A good Christian Family

gone so far are passenger trains and goods trains. We are waiting for the 'Rajdhani Express' to come. If we are dying, die imperially, like an emperor."

³*India Today*, 30 October - 5 November 2007, 52-98.

⁴*Times of India*, 14 February 2018.

is the image of heaven, where members live together by the bond of blood and affection, duly respecting and obeying the parents, walking peacefully before God and people, seeking eternal salvation according to each one's proper state of life." According to Pope Francis, "The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection" (*Amoris Laetitia* 11).

It is amazing that almost a century before the Second Vatican Council, which marks a paradigm shift in the theology of marriage, St. Chavara presented family as an image of heaven, a place of salvation. Love is the uniting factor and basis of the life together in the family. Hence, the concluding statement of GS 37 underscores: "Concern for and commitment to the renewal of family that is clearly visible in the life and mission of Blessed Chavara and articulated in his *Chavarul* inspire us to meaningfully invest CMI resources - personnel and institutions - for the renewal of modern families... The CMI special thrust for family renewal after the model of "*trittoa kudumbam*" and "*thiru kudumbam*" (Trinitarian Family and Holy Family) idealized by St. Chavara, should offer various means for their support and uplift through effective programmes ... develop these families into strongly united covenantal families (*udampadi kudumbam*)."

Based on the biblical vision, the Christian tradition teaches that marriage is a sacrament, symbolic of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Marriage is a life of love. Real love in marriage should be mutual, reciprocal and faithful. It demands respect for the partner and recognizes the equality of the partner. This presupposes a relationship based on justice. This is the quality of love expected both from the husband and wife. Procreation should not be seen in terms of a biological reproduction alone, but has to be understood in the context of the relationship, as integral to the relational meaning of marriage. It is the relationship of the couple that gives procreation a human significance. The child is the fruit of the relationship rooted in love of the couple. Catholic sexual and family ethics have been criticised as having a negative approach towards the goodness of sexuality. Sexual pleasure has to be seen in the context of the relationship between the couple. It is their relationship that leads them to sexual fulfilment, and in return their relationship is strengthened by the experience of pleasure. What Pope Francis says about the erotic dimension of sexuality, sexual desire and conjugal sexual pleasure is noteworthy: "In no way, then, can we consider the erotic dimension of love simply as a permissible evil or a burden to be tolerated for the

good of the family. Rather, it must be seen as gift from God that enriches the relationship of the spouses."⁵

Although the Catholic Church still considers only heterosexual marriage as valid, we cannot ignore any more the arguments which support homosexual unions. Pope Francis' much discussed question, "Who am I to judge?" may be remembered in this context. Many countries have legalized gay marriages. The honourable Supreme Court of India has decriminalized homosexual unions. When homosexuality was decriminalized, initially by the Delhi High Court, the Catholic Church in India opposed it vehemently. However, a couple of years later, Oswald Cardinal Gracias made it clear that though the Catholic Church is opposed to the legalization of gay marriage, it does not consider homosexuals as criminals.⁶ The Church recently came up with its explanation:

That homosexuality is now not a crime in civil law does not mean that homosexual acts or behaviour are morally acceptable or justified. What is legal is not equal to moral acceptability. The Catholic Church holds that homosexual behaviour is morally unacceptable because it violates the purpose of human sexuality which is procreation and union of love fulfilled in the loving union of man and woman in marriage. This is the moral stand of the Catholic Church. At the same time Church also makes a distinction between homosexuality as an orientation for which one cannot be blamed because of early psychogenetic origin or birth and homosexuality acquired by deliberate choice and practice. While the Church makes it clear that homosexual acts are objectively wrong and morally unacceptable, homosexuality as an orientation is not a sign of perversion but as the expression of a condition, an inversion in a psychological sense. It is considered more a medical or pathological consonant with modern studies. The church respects the dignity and human right of the homosexuals. They must be treated with understanding and mercy.⁷

⁵Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §152. Already from Pius XII's "Address to Midwives" (29 October 1951) onward, we find a more positive approach to sexual pleasure in the official documents of the Church.

⁶"Cardinal Gracias Says: 'Gay People Are Not Criminals,'" *Vatican Insider World News*, 11/12/2013, <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/12/11/Vatican-insider/eng/world-news/cardinal-gracias-says-gay-people-are-not-criminals-1M73KjWDvMi9BljfN0P3hL/pagina.html>

⁷Stephen Fernandes, Secretary CBCI.

Similarly, pre-marital sex and cohabitation are receiving wider acceptance in the society. There was a 2010 Supreme Court ruling that pre-marital sex and cohabitation are not offences.⁸ Although no definite teaching is given, *Amoris Laetitia* takes a different stand from the traditional position of the Church regarding cohabitation. A categorical rejection and condemnation of cohabitation cannot be found; instead, the document points out that all situations of cohabitation cannot be judged in the same way, that there are various reasons for cohabitation including 'cultural and contingent situations.' It also calls for the application of the 'Law of Gradualness' in such cases.

The Preparatory document for the Synod on Young People affirms the Church's trust in the youth, and the need of guiding them in their vocational discernment. In the changed cultural context of the world, they are facing many challenges and uncertainties. They need reference points not only among adults, but also among themselves. They also need opportunities to develop their skills and work together. The youth needs guidance in making vocational discernment, or fundamental choices in their life. The document points out: "In pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents." The changed context demands more creative ways of working with the youth. One of such new areas is the digital world.

5. Acting in the Path of Mercy

In order to act in a Christian way, we need to choose a path of mercy. The Church has made a significant investment in the youth. The CMI Congregation spends about 68% of its energy and health for youth and children in its schools, colleges and facilities of formation. However, it is very surprising and sad to note that in our apostolate and secretariat system this has not gained the importance it needs to get. In 1995, we instituted a youth commission but it died out in 1996 due to lack of nutrition. When the church at large is spending time for family, youth and children, we need to re-orient ourselves to the ministry of children and youth. We need to walk with them and understand their language, talk to them as Jesus and St. Chavara talked to them through stories, change their life style and turn them around creatively. We need to train them to be sensitive and responsible citizens.

⁸"Live-in Relationship, Pre-Marital Sex Not an Offence: SC," *The Times of India*, 23 March 2010, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Live-in-relationship-pre-marital-sex-not-an-offence-SC/articleshow/5716545.cms>

Today, the youth prefers to be partners and not just a force who can be forced into discipline. We need to think of youth training camps in this direction. The Synod of 2018 has this one aspect of the youth clearly specified: "To *accompany* young people on their way of life towards maturity so that, through a process of discernment, they can *discover* their life project and realize it with joy, opening the encounter with God and with man, and actively *participating* in the building up of the Church and society." The Synod of 2018 clearly highlights the importance of (i) *accompaniment* (which means understanding their language and world, (ii) Helping to *discover* their project of life (which means to allow them to follow what they want to achieve in life and help them to realize it) and (iii) actively *encouraging* them to participate in Church and society building (which means they need to be involved in the decision making process).

We need to think of a pedagogy which encourages nurturing human values like openness to others, love and justice rather than cut throat competition, bring back the youth who are caught in the 8th continent - digital continent - by thickening the line that separates morality from immorality. Our youth and children will not be given a spirituality that fosters fanaticism and a religion based on rubrics. Let us give them a spirituality of relationship - relationship with God and people.

In order to act in the case of sexual perversity and broken marriages, we have to update ourselves with the developments in the Catholic vision of the family, marriage and sexuality, the challenges and problems today and the response of the Church to those challenges and problems. Careful study of the Church documents is a must.

Personal involvement in the family ministry is important. However, what we can do will be much limited if we try to do everything by ourselves. We need to involve others, collaborate with others, providing our vision and support. We need to do much in this regard. Other religious congregations, organizations, lay people, experts in counselling, youth ministry, etc., are be involved in our ministry to the family. The role of women religious and lay women is very important since they have better access to families.

Pope Francis considers mercy to be central to the Church's ministry to the family. On the one hand, it is an invitation to the Christian families to value the gift of marriage, love, generosity and fidelity. On the other hand, it demands the Church to be near to families which lack peace and joy, strengthen the families by helping them appreciate

their vocation, their mutual love and fidelity, have a pastoral programme to help families in crisis.

6. Institutions as Centres of Family Ministry

As a practical step, we start opening our facilities like our schools and institutions for family counselling so that families around our institutions and schools can approach us for help and guidance. Seminars and talks on family, challenges to family, parenting, etc., can be arranged in our institutions. Talks for parents can be arranged in our schools. Besides, the service of Family Counsellors can be made available in our schools for parents who would like to make use of such facilities. The focus can be parenting skills and the challenges that parents face, but it can also include counselling for couples.

We have to ensure that Redress Committees are formed in schools and institutions, so that the rights of the employees and students are protected. Qualified persons should be part of such committees. Value Education and Religious Education classes in our schools have to be given by teachers who have specialization in these fields.

A well-integrated Sex Education Programme is an urgent need. Biological and social sciences should have their role in sex education, but they cannot be considered as the most important sources for interpreting the meaning/value, because our sexuality is not merely physical, but is profoundly psychological, social and deeply spiritual. Sex education that focuses only on “don’ts” will be rejected and will lead to antagonistic attitudes to Church’s teaching. Besides addressing the various issues that teenagers and the youth face, evaluation of the media presentation of sexuality should be an integral part of sex education. It should present a balanced view of sexuality, especially in the midst of the ideologies that lead to disintegration. Moreover, vocational discernment, Christian vision of family, celibacy, healthy man-woman relationship, etc. should be included in the Sex Education Programme. Healthy use of social networking should be taught to the children and youth.

7. Conclusion

Family is the basic unit of the Church and society. It should never become an isolated entity. Due to the increase in the number of nuclear families, urbanization and tendencies of individualism in the culture, it is possible that the families become closed in themselves. However, the *Chavarul* vision of the family stipulates that family has to be rooted in charity, justice, etc., and has to be integrally connected to the parish

community. There are successful family networks like *Couples for Christ*, *Equip Notre Dame*, *Worldwide Marriage Encounter*, *Christian Family Movement*, etc., with which we can collaborate and further, initiate some similar movement.

The youth are not merely objects or recipients of pastoral activity, but they are agents. Many of them want active involvement in the ministry of the Church. They can contribute a lot in educating children and teenagers. Besides, many young people are taking initiatives in forming small groups and bigger organizations. We need to collaborate with them, support and encourage them, and thus accompany them.

Finally, what St. Chavara has said to the parents through the Chavarul is applicable to every CMI who is entrusted with the care and training of children, youth and families: "Children are sacred treasures entrusted to you by God Almighty... If anyone of the children were to be lost in hell due to the fault of the parents, what a serious hindrance will it be for their salvation."