

DISPUTED QUESTION: ON CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AND THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, and then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. While traditionally the dispute was settled by a master, here we will allow readers to form their own decision.

THE QUESTION

In the following conversation, Br. Henry Stephan and Br. Josemaría Guzmán-Domínguez discuss the relative priority of two hugely important arenas of life: the family and civic friendship. While it is indisputable that both of these are goods and should not be considered as diametrically opposed, it is fruitful to consider which one is more important to emphasize pastorally today. It is with this in mind that the brothers conducted their discussion.

CIVIC FRIENDSHIP AND THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

Br. Henry Stephan (HS): Br. Josemaría, I worry that the Catholic preaching and teaching about the family in this country is lacking something essential. The family is of tremendous importance, but we need to explain it more with reference to the common good. The context in which families grow and thrive matters. Without a strong sense of civic friendship—the wider ties of voluntary association that form the fabric of community life—we risk obscuring the highest good of the individual: not only in the family, but in the state, the Church, and ultimately in the heavenly city itself.

Br. Josemaría Guzmán-Domínguez (JGD): I share your concern about the absence of the common good in Catholic preaching in this country, but I think that the Church is justified in her prioritization of the family, for two reasons. First, the family is the fundamental cell of society, or as you might say the first instance of the common good. As such, it ought to be cared for first. Second and more importantly, the family as such has a role to play in the salvation of souls. God creates each human being in and through a family (broken as it may be), and has entrusted to the family, especially parents, the instruction of their children in the faith. All families, but especially the Christian family, the Domestic Church, ought to be the first place where a person learns he is loved by God and where he learns to correspond to that love by loving his neighbor. This close tie of family life to the life of faith and charity suggests to me the urgency of preaching the Gospel to the family.

HS: What do you sense is the purpose of the family?

JGD: To be the first context in which each person recognizes that God loves him and calls him to participate in His Love through

love of neighbor: first those closest to us, namely, our family members, and then people in broader society and the Church.

HS: I think that's the purpose of each person: to know, love, and serve God and to be happy with Him forever. How is that different from the purpose of how we relate to every other person? How is it that the family is distinctive from the way that other people help us attain this end?

JGD: The family is given to us as a gratuitous and natural gift of God. In Christian families in particular, our parents are given to us to be an image of the love of God the Father. The married couple is also a sacrament of the love that the Church and Christ have for each other, as St. Paul would say (Eph 5:21-33). The family is meant to be a special manifestation of God's love for us that we don't choose; it's simply a gift of grace from God. Other relationships in society involve more of our free choice. We decide with whom we share interests, we pick particular groups to join, we even move depending on which parish we wish to go to. But the family is a free gift from God.

HS: Absolutely, I agree with all of that, and I think there's strong scriptural basis for the family's being a human way of understanding God and understanding our relationship with each other. Indeed, the Trinity itself is the source and exemplar of families.

JGD: Yes, and this spiritual sense of the family is manifest in its very structure. Each person has to be a gift to the others, according to his or her respective roles. This expression of love enlivens each member and the whole family. The family can then be open to the rest of society. Healthy families, like healthy persons, are not simply looking inwards but are oriented outwards to wider society and the Church. Healthy families will promote the right ordering of society itself, the rightful and Christian way of relating to others.

HS: Here's where I think we might have disagreement, not so much on the goal but on the way to come about achieving this goal. Man is by nature a political animal, and this means his end or purpose is realized in the common good. 'Political animal' doesn't mean a Republican elephant or a Democratic donkey, but rather a creature whose highest capacity, whose possibility for flourishing, is realized in communion with others and ultimately in the highest common good of all, God Himself. The common good is not just the sum of several individuals' particular goods, but something more transcendent and worthy of love in itself. And it seems like you point out the family first and foremost—and rightfully so—because that's the first place where we realize the common good. But then how do you see the state, how do you see society, how do you see the Church in relation to it?

JGD: Well, certainly we are called to love persons beyond our families, and in these broader organizations we find human fulfillment and human goods that go beyond the family because they look, as you said, to the common good. It's true that each family has a responsibility to other families, to the city, to the nation as a whole, and to the Church. These relationships, especially in the smaller scale of neighborhoods and cities, are different from the family, but ought to be extensions of the family. St. John Paul II, for example, refers to the parish as a family (*Familiaris Consortio*, 85) and Pope Francis follows by calling the parish "the family of families" within the Church (*Amoris Laetitia*, 87 & 202). And let's not forget that the Church herself has been called the family of God.

HS: If you put too much weight on that kind of poetic or metaphorical language, though, you start to lose any sense of what we mean by "family." Is family the primary unit for understanding the common good? I think it's an essential unit, but I think it comes in a context. Every individual is ordered to the common good, because of our human nature and our ultimate final

end. And the family is perhaps the most important part of that common dimension at first, but so too man has a place within the state, he has a place within the wider society in which he lives and within a whole bunch of other relationships that exist in between. These friendships don't have the same importance, perhaps, in a person's life, as the family, but are in a certain sense the stuff, the environment, in which family life necessarily takes place.

JGD: I agree! And thanks for calling to mind the difference and significance of human relationships beyond the family. We can't just call them "families of families" without reflection on what that might mean. But I think there's something natural to the family that is not there with larger associations. So tell me, Br. Henry, how you think "civic friendships" differ from, relate to, and even transcend the family?

HS: I think this is an essential point because I think those associations follow from man's social nature. They don't have the same, well, biological immediacy, and they aren't as essential to our being as a family is, but they are natural, they're part of who man is. Man is a rational and social animal, but what does that mean? It means he has the capacity for language, and that means that we live in common. It is impossible to conceive of man not coming together to live in community, and that's what we mean when we say political: it's not political in the partisan sense; it's political in the sense of the *polis*, the city, man realizing his end in communion with other people. If you look at the scriptural basis for this, there's a whole tradition of language here of Israel being called together to be the people of God. Take Deuteronomy 7:6: "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth." Our ultimate end, the beatific vision of God, is seen as the fulfillment of the Church, the new Israel, in the heavenly Jerusalem. Consider St. Paul to the Ephesians: "You are fellow citizens with the saints, and members

of the household of God” (2:19). Beatitude itself is enjoyed in the society of the blessed, for God is the ultimate common good! So just as there’s a tradition of the family, there’s a tradition of the City of God. But I think it is natural, and I think we’ve forgotten that in the West, with individualistic ethics gradually obscuring our sense of the common good over the centuries. I think it seems like it is something artificial, and that’s precisely why I get nervous: the fact that the Church doesn’t talk about these relationships as much as we do the family, because it makes it seem as if the family is the only social reality.

JGD: That’s a good point. In the modern world, we seem to approach society, the state, cities, our neighborhoods and even the Church as if they were associations of atomic individuals. In this vision we would come together randomly or simply by our will to associate as we wish. And then we could break up these relationships easily and unproblematically, there being nothing natural to them.

HS: And they’ve been abused. The twentieth century is a long history of man’s tie to the state being abused in the most terrible ways and being put to the most terrible uses such that it has been stretched to the breaking point. And then there’s the acid effects of all of the different ‘isms’ that affect our society. And the Church has talked extensively about their effects on the family and the individual, but they affect just as much—if not more—all of civil society, the whole network of relationships that are so important. You know, I think that’s such a tragedy. Those kinds of relationships help draw you out from your family, help you realize the goal of your family, help prepare you for the life of the Church, which is a higher thing altogether.

JGD: Okay, now let’s move to more practical considerations. How do you think the Church should address this problem on which we have not reflected as much, while yet embracing and promoting her positions on the family?

HS: Well, I think that there is a widespread sense in which we can set up people to fail by placing a great emphasis on the individual family as the place where things happen, as the place where you must put your effort, where you're going to survive the cultural storms, where you're going to make the biggest difference. That places so much weight upon people that it is almost setting them up for failure precisely because it is natural for families to have friendships outside of the boundaries of that family. It is natural to be part of clubs, of organizations, to be involved in the life of a parish, to be involved in the life of a town, to have close ties with other families. And those things aren't negotiable if you're going to fully flourish as a human being. Obviously, they aren't as necessary as a family just for carrying on life, but they're essential to being able to truly grow.

JGD: I agree with you that families need a wider context in order to flourish. And it's interesting you spoke about the "boundaries" of families. I think one of the problems we are confronted with flows from a very modern, and perhaps American, way of shrinking family boundaries to the nuclear family: Mom and Dad and a child or two.

HS: And dogs.

JGD: And dogs. Perhaps a first step toward addressing the problems that come with the bigger associations is simply to stretch the idea of the family boundary. Let's start by including and remembering our grandparents and our uncles and aunts and cousins. Soon enough we find ourselves related to a whole neighborhood. Also, we should reflect on what it means to move away from the place where we grew up, from our family conceived in these broader terms. We take it for granted that we can just move elsewhere and live life and prosper in whatever community, even if we don't have familial roots in that community. The extended family is still family. Broader family ties are important especially since they

form the natural opening and the natural connections to broader society. If we send a Christian man or woman or a Christian couple out, alone, and we tell them, “Go make friends, go associate yourselves with other people, go live in this new city,” where they have no roots, we place a great stress upon them. That’s just as problematic as making families think that they have to do it by themselves or that the life of the Church, the Christian life, is only a matter of their private family life.

HS: I’m glad that you mentioned rootedness. I think that’s a crucial explanation of why so many people feel alienated today. And in a certain sense both family and civic friendship are all about being connected to other people and ultimately to God, which is the friendship which we’re all destined for. Each of these forms of friendship is meant to stretch us, make us more open to love, give us a greater sense of our connectedness to others. Each stage is a preparation for the other, or helps us understand the other. But rootedness gives us a kind of a baseline. It gives us a connection to something that you start with, so that you don’t begin from scratch, you know—you aren’t always the new kid in an unfamiliar schoolroom facing the terror of trying to make friends for the first time. You have these family relationships, which are their own form of friendship that exist just by virtue of your connection of kinship that are here from the start that form the basis for a wider and wider degree of association. But this is the difficulty. How do we deal with that in an age when people move, and families are smaller, and ties are looser? I think that we can’t just counsel people by saying, “Just stop being modern,” or “Lament being born in this century rather than another.”

JGD: That’s true. But in addressing those issues I think the Church has rightly emphasized a sort of countercultural take on the family, perhaps pointing to models of the family outside the modern West. Pope Francis, for example, very charmingly relates his experiences of his Argentinian family; he tells stories of his grandmother, and

of relationships with cousins, or of the importance of the family dinner table—he preaches this often, how families ought to get together, put aside the phone, and start relating to each other. And that’s where we ought to begin addressing the modern problem: in the experience of ordinary, daily, family life. For even with the different difficulties and different conceptions about family life, most people are still living in some sort of family setting, and that’s where the Church has to address the Good News first.

HS: I think that that’s very true, but I think that in the context of challenging people with a countercultural model it’s important to place the emphasis on the wider context in which your countercultural family is going to live. Talking so much about the family just itself places a tremendous strain upon those relationships. I think that it’s too far removed from people’s experience; it risks making people think that they must have the resources to be able to realize all of those different goods just within the family. It’s important to remember also that many in the pews will not be coming from countercultural families, but families that bear many of the painful wounds the culture encourages. Living a good Christian life is not limited to those with a tidy family situation—the common good isn’t closed off to them, even as they face real and painful difficulties. The life of Christian friendship, pointing ultimately to union with God, is of the utmost importance.

JGD: I’m glad you called to mind the many wounded families to whom God sends the Church with His Gospel, which is a call to friendship with God and a call to share in Christ’s divine filiation. It is true that many people suffer deeply from brokenness of their families, and that they won’t always be in a position to promptly remedy and “tidy” those situations in accord with the Christian ideal for family life. Hence the importance of compassionate accompaniment, the attitude which we must adopt in the face of these grave wounds. Pastors, religious men and women, and Christian families all must be willing to suffer with those whose

families hurt. This way they will be assured a place of friendship and a bigger family, which is the Church. I still have questions about how the Church would approach the issue of families and society. Maybe we begin with the parish?

HS: Parish life is distinctive because it has a dual sense to it. In one respect, it is the local part of the Mystical Body of Christ, and is thereby part of a higher form of friendship than either the family or the state—our union with Christ in charity. But precisely at the same time, the parish is the place, the locus, in which the civic friendships which I've been talking about—clubs, organizations, charitable groups, athletic teams—come to be. This kind of parish life involves time and investment, which is a difficulty in a strained era where schedules and patience are at breaking points. It can seem like just another demand on your person. But it's precisely overcoming that sensibility, I think, that is so important for supporting the common good. If the parish doesn't present, and if the Christian life doesn't present these ordinary forms of association, then I think we're missing something big in the gospel that we ought to be preaching to families, to individuals.

JGD: I agree with you that this greater context of the Christian life is very important and that the family in fact points to and helps nourish it. My difficulty is that this lovely picture of parish life doesn't seem to exist in very many places.

HS: Tell me about it!

JGD: So how do we go about forming these parishes? How do we preach to individuals and families so that they understand the Christian life to mean more than showing up on Sundays or for their sacraments?

HS: This is the reason why I think it is worthwhile to make this a pastoral priority. By making individual and familial happiness

seem like the principal emphasis, we make it more of a private good, it seems, like saying, “Alright, what is the parish for? It’s for your sacramental fulfillment,” when instead we should be emphasizing the common good, in all of its different respects, which include these forms of civic friendship. They may not be as important as the sacraments, or as elemental as the family, but the individual and the family suffer in their absence. Parishes should be places where the whole vision of the Christian life in the common good can be realized, however imperfectly, and where there is a strong witness of genuine communion. Religious life, of course, serves this role even more radically, pursuing conformity to Christ through a regular life, lived in common. The more universal the common good, the more we ought to love it.

JGD: You make a fair point about the pastoral urgency of teaching about the common good. And this vision of the parish and related forms of friendship seem to be a good place to start. What’s more, it fits with what the Church has taught about family life. For she always speaks of the openness of the family to others, and of the greater ties for which the family prepares us, especially for friendship with God and in His Church. But maybe this message hasn’t been adequately expressed. And instead families—if they’re good Christian families—can sometimes think of themselves as little islands and pockets of isolated hope and Christian faithfulness. They’re meant to be much more than that; they’re meant to be evangelical and transformative.

HS: I think that’s quite true. There’s one more topic that I’d like to bring up, if we could. That is the sense in which so many today feel a deep sense of despair about the state of society at large. A renewed focus on civic friendship is a very good counterpart to precisely that problem because it actually gives a real possibility to counter that.

JGD: I agree. And this focus on the Christian life as a call to friendship, in the family, the neighborhood, the city, and the Church would do much good. But I still see one problem, that of presentation. I think we need to make it clear to families that the common good of civic friendship is their good, that the common good is for the good of their family as well. The Church needs to capitalize on the desire for well-being that parents have for their children, on the natural love that families have for their own, so as to teach them that these broader friendships are good for them, how they're good for them, and how the Church can help them flourish.

HS: At the same time, looking out at the cultural and political landscape today, the temptation to despair of the common good is understandable. After all, we face tremendous difficulties collectively on so many different fronts that it can be tempting just to focus on one's own situation and tend to it as best one can. The truth remains, though, that human nature can only be fulfilled in the common good—in the family, civic friendships, the republic, the Church, and ultimately, to God Himself. I think that's a very hopeful message.

JGD: Yes. Hopefully the Church will preach anew this “gospel to the city” as an expansion of the “gospel to the family.” This way the world may begin to see how our families and societies are ordered to the love of God, the love of neighbor, and to the highest common goods—the Heavenly Jerusalem, the family of God.

HS: You will preach to Athens yet, I am convinced.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

On the Family

St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*; *Gratissimam Sane*

Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*; General Audience on 11/11/15

On Civic Friendship

Charles De Koninck, *Primacy of the Common Good*

Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*

R.R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*

Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic*

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