



Finding Divine Love: Supporting Single-Parent Families on their Spiritual Journey

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Abstract: This study explored the Church's perspective on single-parent families, viewing the family as a fundamental unit for spiritual growth and love. Recognising that single-parent families faced unique challenges, the research drew inspiration from the documents *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*, which emphasised the need for the Church to extend its love and support to these families. Using a phenomenological approach supported by relevant literature, the study investigated the Church's stance on single-parent families and their right to experience God's love. The research findings indicated that the Church was specifically called to demonstrate love through its pastoral practices towards single-parent families. By offering understanding, respect, and tailored support, the Church became a tangible manifestation of God's love for these families. The Church's dedication to embracing families in challenging situations served as a powerful testament to the love and compassion of God. In conclusion, this research underscored the importance of the Church's role in loving and supporting single-parent families. The Church acknowledged the inherent worth of single-parent families by adhering to the principles outlined in *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*. It actively ensured they felt valued and embraced within the faith community. The study emphasised the significance of the Church's commitment to nurturing spiritual growth and fostering love in all types of families, including those led by single parents.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the importance of accompanying single-parent families (Van Gasse, 2020). Single-parent families are included in the vulnerable group because they are "in need." Pain here does not mean in the true sense (physical) but rather "inner pain" because they feel lonely, have many problems, have to endure alone, or receive less attention. A single-parent family is a family without a father or mother, which means that only one parent performs the functions of a family (Wahyuni et al., 2015). Single-parent families can be caused by two things, namely divorce or the death of a partner. The term single parent is explained: The single-parent family has also been termed the one-parent, the lone-parent, and the solo-parent family, among others, to describe its structure. No one term speaks precisely to the many forms of single-parent families. Single-parent family implies that a mother or father is parenting single-

handedly (Hanson, 1987). Thus, single-parent families are families in which a father or a mother does family functions alone.

The family is the smallest unit of society, consisting of people who gather and live under one roof and are usually related by blood or marriage in interdependence. Psychologically, the family is a group of people who live together in a shared residence. Each member feels an inner circle so that there is mutual influence and love for each other (Shochib, 2011). A family consists of a husband and wife and children who live together by sharing affection, attention, ideas, happiness, sadness, and experiences to be happy (Prayitno, 2011). Family has eight functions, namely educational functions, socialisation functions, protection functions, affective functions, religious functions, economic functions, recreational functions, and biological functions (Fahrudin, 2014).

Pope John Paul II emphasised the Church's pastoral urgency to accompany Christian families in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*. Further, in his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis also underlined what Pope John Paul II said by urging that there must be special pastoral care for separated, divorced, or abandoned families. The Church recognises marriage and family as the most precious human values. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the Christian family as a communion of persons, a sign and image of the fellowship of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Church intends to serve and help families with familial problems. Pastoral officers of the Church must provide religious efforts that are more prepared according to the example of the Good Shepherd for families who are in difficult circumstances (Go, 1989). Thus, this is the main problem in the pastoral field of the family throughout the Church, namely how to serve and assist families with different conditions and situations (Capéau, 2020).

The Catholic family is a community of love, a community of life, and a community of salvation (Eminyan, 2001). The characteristics of the Catholic family are, of course, in harmony with the life of the early Church, which directly experienced the life of Jesus. The teachings on love play a significant role in the teachings of Jesus. In the apostolic document *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II explains how the teachings on love reveal its form. The first form is that the family is a community of persons. It is a communion of faith with a constant effort to develop an authentic community of life between persons—the smallest and easiest personal fellowship to be found in the connection between family members. Harmony, good communication, and warm relationships indicate a Catholic family life.

The second form is that the family serves life. The second fundamental task of the family is to help one another, to concretely manifest in history the blessings of the Creator in the beginning, namely procreation (procurement of offspring), the transmission of the divine image from person to person. Furthermore, parents are bound by an obligation to educate children because parents have passed their lives on to their children. Therefore, parents know that they are the first and foremost educators. In this case, parents' strength in raising their children serves their children's lives.

The third form is that the family participates in the development of society. The family is “the first and most important cell of society” because the Creator of the universe sanctified the marital union to be the origin and basis of human society. Thus, the family has a social function. It is called to serve society. The social role of this family is also a characteristic of families living in society. The families must want to be actively involved in building their community because society is the second place where they live.

The fourth duty is that the family participates in the life and mission of the Church. The family is called to serve in the building of the Kingdom of God in history by sharing in the life and mission of the Church (Firmanto, 2021). The mission of the Church is the mission of Jesus himself, which is to proclaim the news of salvation throughout the world. The Catholic family is a community that believes in and proclaims the Gospel by participating in the mission of the Church. The Catholic family is involved in the mission of Jesus himself. Therefore, Catholic families need to see what the world needs today. Their contribution participates in helping build God’s Kingdom in the world.

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II said the family has three leading roles, referring to Jesus Christ as a prophet, priest, and king (FC, 81-97). The Catholic family enacts the prophetic role by proclaiming the Gospel, the news of salvation, to all nations. The Catholic family participates in living the life and mission of the Church, which listens to the word of God and proclaims it. The Catholic family is a community in dialogue with God. In this case, the Catholic family lives priestly in personal communion with the universal Church because they sanctify the community and the world (Armandany *et al.*, 2023). The Catholic family is a community in service to others. The Catholic families elaborate on the kingship role by practising their “devotion” in love for God and his fellow human beings. The way of life of Christ, who exercised his royal authority by serving mankind, becomes its foundation. Furthermore, seeing that from the very beginning, Jesus’ ministry was focused on the poor, oppressed, and neglected, ministry and assistance to families who are poor, oppressed, and failed must also be the Church’s primary concern at this time. Therefore, the problem raised in this research is how the Church serves and accompanies single-parent families in seeking God’s love.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology, etymologically, comes from the Greek “phaenomenon,” which means to appear. Meanwhile, according to the form of the word, phenomenology means the science of phenomena or appearances. Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) pioneered this philosophical movement. In Husserl’s phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology tends toward researching all aspects of human attachment to the world (Bertens, 1987). With phenomenology, we can study forms of experience from the point of view of people who experience it directly, as if we were experiencing it ourselves. Phenomenology not only classifies every conscious action taken but also includes predictions of future actions, seen from the aspects associated with them. This

concept comes from how a person interprets objects in his experience (Kuswarno, 2009). Phenomenology helps people to empathise with each other. It allows people to share the suffering, joy, happiness, or suffering experienced by others. It will enable people to interpret other people's experiences in their own eyes.

Husserl advocated a "return to things themselves" (Bertens, 1987). He wants to say there is a need to return to everyday life because phenomenology cannot be separated from everyday life. Phenomenology is also a variety of life events that are not separate from one another (Riyanto, 2011). Dhavamony reiterated Husserl's thought,

Phenomenology must return to the data, not thoughts, namely to the case itself, which must reveal itself. In Husserl's words, the subject must let go or put all his assumptions and beliefs between brackets and look sympathetically at the object that directs him. For Husserl, proper knowledge is the presence of data in the mind's consciousness, not the engineering of the mind to form a theory (Dhavamony, 1995). Thus, Husserl wanted to see data based on subjective experience, not abstract thoughts from the mind. Phenomena contain events, daily experiences, anxieties-griefs-joys that belong to everyone.

The informants in this study were Miss Maria, Miss Stefani, Miss Sumiati, and Miss Elisabet. Research informants are purposive samples. The research data is obtained through the interview method (depth interview). The questions in this study are open interviews, which consist of questions so that the informants are not limited in their answers to a few words or only to answer "yes" or "no" but can say long explanations and stories (Koentjaraningrat, 1977).

This study uses qualitative data analysis techniques because the data collected is small, monographic, or in the form of cases (so they cannot be arranged into a classification structure). Coding techniques are used to process the results of interviews with research informants. The coding technique attempts to classify the informants' answers according to their types. The coding technique is a quantitative data processing technique. Still, the method is elaborated into a qualitative data processing technique to produce accurate and easy-to-read data.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of interviews conducted with the four research subjects.

Table 1. Interview Results

Theme	Informant Statement
Problems that often arise in the family	Economic problem was a significant problem in our family. My income alone is not enough for all family expenses. I have to earn extra income from part-time work (Maria).
	Our family's economy is mediocre; if you don't just work for a day, maybe you can't feed your family. I am embarrassed to borrow from my parents. I was also sorry to borrow from a friend because I was afraid that I would not be able to repay my loan. Not to mention the fussy child, ask for this and that (Stefani).
	The cost of going to school is now expensive. Students should not go to school if they do not pay tuition fees. School books are also costly. Textbooks cannot be photocopied; you must buy a new one (Sumiati).

	I work from 07.00 to 18.00. The family economy is not a problem because I am a career woman. But, I feel that my relationship with my kid in recent years has become very tenuous because I am rarely at home with my child (Elizabeth).
Impact of "single parent" status on children	My kid lost a father figure who was strict in education. So my kid dared to be with me and often went outside the house without permission (Maria). Because I rarely get scolded, my kid has dared to lie to his parents (Stefani). Children are unruly. Their behaviour is not following the family rules (Sumiati). The lack of affection from a father is something that my kid feels deeply. My kid saw complete parents with their children. My kid did not experience it (Elizabeth).
The role of "single-parent" in the family	I am both a father and a mother to my kids (Maria). I prepared all the needs of the child (Stefani). I think it's the same with other families, which is to educate children well (Sumiati). I was self-employed to earn income for the family (Elisabeth).
The parish has made time for single-parent family mentoring	I have not seen announcements about gatherings for single-parent families in the parish activities (Mary). The parish priest only made family visits (Stefani). I have never heard that the parish holds activities for single-parent families (Sumiati). As far as I know, the parish has not assisted the family of a single parent (Elizabeth).

Table 2. Research Findings

Problems that arise in single-parent families	Economic problems.
	Children's education.
	Relationship problems with children.
The impact of single-parent families on children	The child lacks the affection of a father.
	Children do not have a father figure.
	The child disobeys the parents.
	The child is not honest with the parents.
	Children often go outside the house.
The roles of single-parent families	Educate children well.
	Prepare all the needs of family life.
	Do dual roles as father and mother to the children.
The need for mentoring from the Church for single-parent families	There has been no special assistance from the parish.
	Only limited to visits and less in-depth.
	There is no particular activity for single-parent families.
	There is no particular association for single-parent families.

The research findings above show that the problems that single-parent families often face are economic, issues with children's education, and problems with relationships with children. Financial problems must be faced alone by single parents. A single-parent mother must bear the relatively high workload and demands of family life. Economic issues become even more complicated if a family member is unhealthy and must undergo hospital treatment. Hospital costs that are not cheap are often a problem for single-parent families. The monthly

salary received is not proportional to the family's expenses in one month. This condition makes single-parent families look for additional work to earn extra income.

The second problem single-parent families face is the problem of children's education. The extra hours that single parents work for an everyday living are often the main reason children are neglected. Children often only meet their single parent when it is night and even then, only briefly because the parents are tired of working all day. Children who receive less attention from their single parents are automatically distant (psychologically) from their parents. Thus, children's education in the family becomes a real impact that single-parent families must consider.

The third problem that is also an obstacle for single-parent families is the relationship with children. The lack of encounters with parents is why children seek an outlet outside the family, namely friends. Children often leave the house and rarely feel comfortable at home because they don't feel close to their families. This condition should be watched out for because association with people outside the family without being based on good moral education within the family often plunges children into unknown dangers.

Weinraub and Wolf stated that single parents experience higher stress levels than ordinary families, which are influenced by lifestyle changes and long work hours (Weinraub, 1983). Research conducted by Weinraub and Wolf confirms this research regarding several main problems single-parent families face: lifestyle changes and long working hours often entangle single parents with economic issues, children's education, and relationships with their children. They (single-parent families) have difficulty dividing time for their families.

The Impact of Single-Parent Families on Children

Research conducted by Brassard, which was published in the journal *Psychology in the Schools* in 1982, revealed that,

Children raised in single-parent homes have an increased risk for psychological damage and poor academic achievement. Compared to intact families, studies have shown that the intellectual achievement of children from single-parent families is lower on measures of school performance and standardised tests of intelligence and achievement (see Shinn, 1978, for an excellent review). The evidence suggests higher anxiety levels, mainly due to financial difficulties and reduced parental direction, account for lower academic achievement (Brassard, 1982).

Children raised in single-parent families have a greater risk of developing psychological damage and low academic achievement compared to intact families. This condition is influenced by the economic conditions of the family and the lack of guidance from single parents to children.

Children who live in single-parent families differ from those who live in intact families. The single-parent status carried by the child's parents will undoubtedly have no small impact on the child's development. Based on the results of the research conducted by Brassard, several effects were found on children according to the recognition of their parents. The first impact is that children do not get their father's love. A mother who becomes a single parent for her child

must play a dual role in her family, as a mother and a father. But no matter how well the role is played, the role of a father remains irreplaceable for children. The hard upbringing that the father usually gives is not easily duplicated by the mother, who replaces his role.

The second impact is that children disrespect their parents (mother). This condition is because the relationship between the two is not close. It can be imagined how busy the daily activities of a single parent are; from morning to night, a single parent has to work or attends Church events. Automatically, the number of meetings between mother and child is significantly less, and this causes children to disrespect their parents for various reasons.

The third impact is that children often go outside the home. One reason this happens is the association of children with friends that exceeds the relationship between parents and children. Children become closer to their friends, so they feel at home around their friends, not near their parents (mother).

Fostering Love in the Family

One of the focuses of Jesus' attention during His mission was people who were suffering, persecuted, poor, neglected, sick, imprisoned, etc. The Gospel of Luke emphatically and openly presents the visions and missions of Jesus in the world, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, and he has sent me to proclaim deliverance to captives, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). Furthermore, Jesus gave clear directions for His disciples regarding whom they should serve, "It is not to the healthy who need a physician, but the sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). The call to serve vulnerable people is a priority scale for Jesus.

An excellent saying goes, "Only a person who has felt that he is loved can love others." Love, thus, is like a river that flows and wets every tree around it, and then the tree produces fruit that can be enjoyed by anyone or anything around it. Love will never stop pouring and drenching the world with pleasure and every good thing that follows. With love, we can form children as we wish (Sumarno, 2015). Therefore, fostering love in the family is essential in pastoral care for single-parent families. Single-parent families must be able to find God's love in their family. Even though their family is no longer complete (consisting of a father, mother, and children), they can still see God's love working endlessly. It can be the initial step for single-parent families to see God's love in their families.

Every family in this world has its function and role. Likewise, even though single-parent families are not complete families, they have their functions and roles. It was found that single-parent families have three roles.

The first function is that single-parent families educate children well. This role seems to be the same as the role of the family in general. Still, the difference is that one parent only carries out the part of educating children. The intensity of meetings between single parents and their children is challenging for their children's education.

The second function is that single-parent families prepare all the needs of family life. Supporting the family should be the responsibility of the husband and wife. Still, in single-parent families, only one person takes this role. The necessities of life referred to here include the needs for clothing, food, and boards, plus the requirements for children's schooling and health needs and other needs at any time.

The third function is that single-parent families have a dual role as mother and father for children. Being a mother alone is difficult, especially when coupled with being a father. The burden that is carried is twice as heavy. But this is the reality that a single parent must take. They must be able to be a compassionate mother and a strict father in educating their children.

The fifth function is that single-parent families love their families, especially their children. Such love for children can shape children according to what parents want so that children will experience being loved and then learn to love others.

Pastoral Accompaniment for Single-Parent Families

Jesus' mission is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the captives, sight for the blind, free the oppressed, and announce that the year of God's grace has come (Sibori *et al.*, 2022). Jesus cares about the condition of the lowly, poor, and oppressed. Today, the single-parent family is one of the concrete forms of "little people" that concern Jesus and should also be of concern to the Church. Single-parent families need special pastoral care for only one reason: God's love for weak people. So far (according to the confessions of the research subjects), the Church's pastoral officers have only limitedly visited families without delving into the problems that exist in these families. In addition, the Church's ministerial officers have not provided assistance or special activities capable of developing single-parent families. For this reason, special religious services are needed to accommodate these families in seeking God's love in their respective families.

In the document *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis states that special consideration for pastoral assistance for separated, divorced, or abandoned people needs special care. This assistance includes respecting single-parent families, reconciliation and mediation services, and even establishing a counselling centre based in the diocese (AL, 133). In addition, children of single-parent families must receive special attention from the Church because they are only "victims" of their parent's separation (AL, 135). "God created man in His image-likeness. He calls man to be true because of His love, as well as to love" (FC, 22). This quote is the basis for the Church to love humans because God calls humans to love. Likewise, with the Church, she is called to love human beings, more concretely, to love within families.

The Church's pastoral care should not be limited to the closest Christian families. This concern should broaden its horizons in harmony with the Heart of Christ and appear even more passionate towards families in general, especially those facing difficulties or unusual situations (FC, 98-99).

The Church is called to love families, especially families facing difficulties or unusual situations, namely single-parent families. The Church's call to love single-parent families is a

sign of God's love in their families. This call to love should be realised through various pastoral activities, including listening to family developments and accompanying them step by step in their formation and growth stages (Firmanto & Marianto, 2022).

Pastoral teams need special consideration for pastoral care for separated, divorced, or abandoned people. Respect, reconciliation, mediation services, and special counselling should be given to those suffering from such situations (AL, 133). Furthermore, Pope Francis added that single-parent families are not excommunicated and should not be treated as such. The Church should care about them because it expresses the love of God (AL, 134). The Church's concern must not only stop at the single-parent status imposed by parents but especially on children who are often innocent victims of such situations. This condition was expressed very clearly by Pope Francis in the document *Amoris Laetitia*,

Never, never, never treat your child as a hostage! You parted because of many problems and reasons. Life has presented you with this test, but your children should not bear the brunt of this separation or be held hostage by the other spouse. They must grow up hearing their mother speak well of their father, even though they are not together, and their father says well of their mother (AL, 135).

God's love, thus, is not only manifested in genuine concern for single parents, but more importantly, it must be manifested in the presence of the Church for children who are "victims" of their parents. The Church must be able to become a second home where these children grow and develop in their faith (Firmanto, 2016). The Church should pay special attention to children from single-parent families because only then does God's love become real in single-parent families.

CONCLUSION

In his groundbreaking document *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis presents recommendations to assist families facing challenging circumstances, including single-parent families. One of the key aspects emphasised by the Pope is the importance of respect and dignity to these families. By acknowledging their unique situations and struggles, the Church can foster an environment of understanding and support.

Moreover, Pope Francis suggests providing reconciliation and mediation services to resolve conflicts that may arise within single-parent families. These services can facilitate communication, healing, and the restoration of relationships, contributing to a healthier family dynamic.

The Pope goes a step further by proposing the establishment of specialised counselling centres within dioceses. These centres would offer targeted assistance to single-parent families, addressing their specific needs and providing guidance through their challenges. However, it is essential to note that these suggestions are not exhaustive, as Pope Francis encourages local Churches to explore creative and innovative approaches to supporting single-parent families.

The Church becomes a tangible manifestation of God's love by extending love and acceptance to single-parent families. Rather than ostracising or excluding these families, the

Church's primary concern lies in serving and accompanying them on their journey, ultimately helping them encounter God within the context of their own families.

In conclusion, Pope Francis's call to love and support single-parent families showcases the transformative power of God's love through the Church's ministry. The Church is instrumental in helping single-parent families discover God's presence and love amidst their unique circumstances by offering respect, reconciliation services, counselling centres, and personalised assistance.

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