



A Family Perspective in Church and Society *(from USCCB website)*

What is a family perspective?

A family perspective is a guiding vision for planning, implementing, and evaluating programs, ministries, and policies in a parish, school, or any other church institution. It is an example of a systems view of reality. It functions in two related ways. First, it views individuals in the context of their family and other social relationships. Second, it uses family relationships as a criterion to assess the impact of programs, ministries, and policies.

A family perspective is an attempt to put into practice what Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*: "No plan for organized pastoral work at any level must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral area of the family" (n.70). A family perspective is a way of "taking into consideration" the family in a very comprehensive way.

At the foundation of a family perspective are **four elements** that touch the heart of contemporary family life and, in a sense, define it. Incorporating a family perspective into church life means understanding and utilizing these four elements, in a dynamic balance, when planning, implementing, and evaluating any and all ministries. A family perspective is a foundational way of thinking about church life and ministry. It functions as a broad paradigm.

First Element: A Christian Vision of Family Life

This is the foundation. Because Christians enter into a covenant of love with Jesus Christ, we are called to act with a consciousness of Christ's presence in our family lives. A family striving to place Christ at its center becomes the most basic Christian community: a domestic church. Although it may struggle at times, it will strive to communicate effectively, love deeply, forgive frequently, and share its values with one another. It will also be lifegiving: bringing children into the world and rearing them responsibly; developing the potential of all its members; handing on values and traditions. The Christian family will respond to a call of service in society and church by modeling love, generosity, hospitality, and caring and by reaching out to others in need.

Second Element: The Family as a Developing System

A family perspective assumes that an individual lives, not in isolation, but connected to others by relationships. Familial relationships are among the most important in our lives. Ministry with any individual, insofar as it is designed to facilitate change or conversion, inevitably has an impact on his or her system of relationships. Moreover, that very same relationship system will strongly influence a person's capacity for ministering and being ministered to.

Third Element: Family Diversity

American Catholic families no longer fit into one simple mold. In addition to the normative nuclear family model, there are single-parent families; families of divorce; situations of unemployment, mobility, mixed religion, cultural and racial differences. A family perspective names and celebrates the uniqueness of each family. It seeks to build on each family's strengths and to help each one meet its distinct challenges.

Fourth Element: Partnership between Families and Institutions

Families deal regularly with a variety of public and private institutions, systems, governmental agencies, programs, etc. in an attempt to meet their needs. A family perspective strives to build a working relationship or partnership between families and other entities that participate in family responsibilities. Such entities -- including parishes and schools -- must not only respect the primary responsibility families have for the wellbeing of their members, but also enable families to fulfill that responsibility. Families want and deserve to be treated with respect as trusted partners.

Conclusion

These four elements, taken as a whole, form a lens through which both church and society are urged to view the contemporary family. They also constitute the basis for raising and answering questions about the impact of programs and policies on family life. To bring a family perspective to ministry does not necessarily mean adding new programs, personnel or structures. Rather, it suggests that you examine what exists with a view toward making it more sensitive to the complex reality of family life and, ultimately, toward placing families at the center of the Church's life and mission.

The full scope of a "family perspective", including useful background data about family life and ideas for introducing the idea of a family perspective into your church or organization, can be found in the publication *A Family Perspective in Church and Society* (available in an updated, tenth-anniversary edition from the United States Catholic Conference, Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 3211 Fourth Street N.E., Washington, D.C.20017. 1-800-235-8722.