

The family as a source of relational goods

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1. What qualifies a family as a common good? The worldwide debate about ‘what *is*’ and ‘what *makes* the family’, and what are its outcomes in terms of common goods (or evils), needs a clarification. In this contribution, I wish to claim that only a relational perspective can deal with these issues properly.

The common good is not a good of an aggregative type which consists of the sum of the well-being of the individuals belonging to a group or collectivity, but is instead a good of relational type, which consists in sharing the relationships from which derive individual and common goods. We need to draw a distinction between *purely aggregative* and *relationally generative* types of family forms. Of course, both of them can produce individual and common evils. It happens when they fail to adopt a *relational steering* which transforms the bad into the good relationships. In terms of social policies, the best welfare practices are those that resort to methodologies of networking which aim to promote the family through interactive relational networks which stimulate the development of the natural potentials of the families themselves.

My argument is that the family is a common good in a very different sense in regards to that which circulates in the mass media. *The common good is not a good of an aggregative type* which, as a general concept, consists of the sum of the well-being of the individuals belonging to a group or collectivity, but is instead *a good of relational type*, which consists in sharing the relationships from which derive both individual and community goods. I will draw a distinction between aggregative and generative couples.¹

2. The core of my argumentation is that it is necessary “to think relationally” about the family.² Since human social reality, and the family in the first place, is made up of relations, only with relational thinking one can see something which otherwise remains hidden, latent, unsaid and indescribable, lacking reflexivity. I am referring to those relational goods on which the human quality and spirituality of life of every individual depend.

If one looks at the image of a mother (or a father) with their small child in her (his) arms, one sees two persons and their glances. One can identify with the feelings of the mother (or of the father) and can appreciate the glances and the gestures of the child. One does this interiorly. The feelings and thoughts of the external observing person, as well as of the mother (or father) and of the child, apparently seem to be events pertaining only to their individual interior life. But it is not exactly so. What happens inside each person is an effect of staying in a certain relationship within a specific relational context. The observing person is not only stimulated by the parent-child relationship she observes, but is living that relationship in herself, in a silent dialogue with that relationship, since the parent and the child are speaking to her through their relationship. These are the relations of which I am talking. People observe individuals, but they feel and reflect through/with/in the relations to them. We are sensitive to other persons because they talk to us through/with/in the relation they have between them and

¹ P. Donati (2012). *Family Policy: A Relational Approach*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, e-book; P. Donati (ed.) (2012). *La relazione di coppia oggi: una sfida per la famiglia*. Trento: Edizioni Erickson.

² P. Donati (2011). *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.

with us. We, as persons, are ‘individuals–in–relation’ to others in a relational context. Relations shape the context, and have an influence on the individuals because they belong to it in some way or another.

Let us imagine what a parent feels, and imagine what a child feels. The truth is that we see two individuals, but we think *through* their relationship, we think *with* their relation, we put ourselves *into* their relation. What we feel depends upon the relationship that we act towards these figures and towards the situation in its complexity for what the latter signifies: the meaning of the situation is a relation, or, better, a network of relations.

The same thing occurs when one observes a couple of lovers. One sees two people who look at each other, they talk, they exchange affectionate gestures, they behave between themselves *in a certain way*: that way is a relation. Whoever observes the partners thinks that s/he can understand what type of relation they have by looking at their faces, their gestures and their communicative expressions. But what is the reality of their relationship? This reality remains invisible. Rarely the people that live (in) this reality have a reflexive awareness of it. When this reality becomes a problem, to make it emerge, and to treat it in a counselling setting, requires a relational thought capable of comprehending the specific (*sui generis*) relationship that one is facing and the vicissitudes of this relationship.

It is the relationship that guides the perceptions and gives a form to our feelings, which of course are elaborated inside ourselves. A mother with a child, a father with a son, a couple of lovers or a family group find their identity in the relation of reciprocal belonging. The feelings come from *that* relationship. If there was a different relationship, the feelings would be different. It would also be different the identity which we attribute to ourselves and the others. Emotions and feelings lead people to take a positive identity if they generate a mature relationship,³ that is if they feed the relational skills of their identities. For example, when we say ‘this is a good mother’, or ‘a good father’, a ‘harmonious couple’, a ‘beautiful family’, or a ‘depressed mother’, or an ‘absent father’, an ‘entangled couple’, an ‘unhappy family’, etc., we refer to individual or collective qualities that are, in fact, relational goods or evils, which however remain impalpable.

The problem of the relation is that they are invisible, they are immaterial, they are *intangible goods*. In order to be able to understand what this means we can compare the reality of social relations with the air. Even air is invisible, it is intangible. However, we cannot live without air. The relationships are the same thing. We cannot live without the relationships. Without social relations, we die as human beings. But the fact is that we can perceive their existence only when they are negative, when they cause us problems, or are absent while we need them. In the case of air this is very clear. If the air is very polluted, or too hot or too cold, then we perceive it exists because it creates problems. The same happens in the family. It is when the bad relationships appear that we perceive the existence of an intangible and vexatious reality that eludes us. The relationships are part of our existence, not only corporeal but also and above all psychological, cultural and spiritual. When they become an irritating problem, then we are forced to reflect on as what to do, and we must find an “*order from noise*”.

A parallel comparison could be done with the light. In fact, we do not see the light as such, but we see things through/with/in the light. If we are in the dark, we cannot see anything. The light shows us the reality around us. In a large hall lit, we see that some things are illuminated more and others less, the beams of light colour in various ways people and things. And yet we do not see the light as we do not see social relations, but it is they who make us see persons and things. Their effect becomes visible when we turn off the light or we change their color and intensity. But still we cannot see the light as such.

The difference between the air and the social relationship is very instructive. The air is a mixture of various gases which doesn’t have an appropriate molecule. Social relationships

³ Vincenzo Masini (2009). *Dalle emozioni ai sentimenti. Manuale di artigianato educativo e di counselling relazionale*. Lucca: Edizioni Prepos; Id. (2015). *Relazioni evolute*. Lucca: Edizioni Prepos.

are different because, when stabilized, they have a specific ‘social molecule’.⁴ To say that stable social relations have their own proper social molecule, while the air doesn’t, means that: (i) they exist as external reality with regards to the terms of the relationship, that is they are an emerging phenomenon (the Latin *ex-sistere* means ‘stay outside’ with its own consistency), whereas the air is only a mix of elements, i.e. an aggregative phenomenon; (ii) this emergent structure has *sui generis* properties, qualities and causal powers which are not the sum of those pertaining to its components (like in the formation of water H₂O from hydrogen and oxygen).

The family has its own ‘molecular structure’ in so far as it emerges from the combination of the couple relation and the generative relation, with their agents and their own emergent effect, which means that, from these relations, a reality of different order comes into being that is called ‘family’. By analogy with the biological genome, I call it the ‘social genome of the family’, as I will explain later on. It is on the backdrop of this structure, which of course is highly dynamic, that the family can generate the relational goods (or, in case it fails, the relational evils) for itself and the surrounding community.

The world regarding relations is a world in which we live like the air, but of which in ordinary life one is little or not aware of this, because one gives for granted the air itself. The activities of *counselling* and various therapeutic practices are ways that try to bring to the surface these relationships, rendering them more conscious and reflexive. In order to understand the relational dynamics in a family, practitioners need to organize their observations with certain modalities, i.e. they have to ponder relations by relying upon n-th order observations and relational feedbacks.⁵ Automatic feedbacks can be useful in terms of producing practical therapeutic effects, as when the practitioner adopts the technique of enjoining a paradoxical prescriptive norm according to the model developed by the so-called Milano school.⁶ But in this case social relations are not properly ‘seen’ and accounted for, they are only ‘performed’, they are used without achieving a deep understanding of their meaning. If people want to have families who are aware of what is happening within them, they have to activate a specific *relationality able to be reflexive about their own relations*, which means to foster a *relational reflexivity* in the interactions between the family members.

We need to make two basic distinctions. The first is about the difference between personal and social *identity*: personal identity is the answer to the question: “who am I *for my self*?”, while social (or relational) identity is the answer to the question ‘who am I *for the others*?’. The second distinction is about personal and relational *reflexivity*. Personal reflexivity can be defined as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, *to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa*”, while relational reflexivity is “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all (normal) people, *to consider the influence of their relation(s) with relevant others on to themselves and vice versa*.” Relational reflexivity is needed to manage the *relations* between personal and social identity.⁷

3. In the pre-modern society and yet again in the early modernity, the world of social relationships was given for granted. The society had its direction sufficiently stable, reproductive, based on mores and customs, in majority of religious origin. It was a society guided by habit. The society in which we live today, by globalization, is instead always more morphogenetic. We are living in the social morphogenesis. If we want to orient ourselves in

⁴ P. Donati (2013). *Sociologia della relazione*. Bologna: il Mulino.

⁵ P. Donati (2015). *Social Mechanisms and Their Feedbacks: Mechanical vs Relational Emergence of New Social Formations*. In M.S. Archer (ed.), *Generative Mechanisms Transforming the Social Order*. New York: Springer, pp. 65-92.

⁶ M. Selvini-Palazzoli, L. Boscolo, G. Cecchin & G. Prata (1980). *Paradox and counterparadox: A new model in the therapy of the family in schizophrenic transactions*. New York: Jason Aronson.

⁷ See P. Donati (2011). ‘Modernization and relational reflexivity,’ *International Review of Sociology/Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, 21 (1), pp. 21-39.

the world, we must necessarily render the relationships more explicit and reflexive. We cannot give them for granted. The family have to respond to the 'reflexive imperative'.⁸ The family relationships change incessantly and because of this our comprehension has to be made "more relational". There aren't any more fixed models and consequent deviances: we have to deal with processes of *relational morphogenesis*.

In as much as the relationships nowadays are becoming morphogenetic, we have to arm ourselves with a *new relational paradigm* of the human person, of the family and of the whole society.⁹ This need regards all of the human and social sciences, but one must be careful: there exists many and different so-called 'relational paradigms'. The fundamental distinction passes between *constructivist* and *realistic* paradigms, that is, in other words, between *relationist* (relativist) and *relational* (non relativist) paradigms.

a) In those relational approaches that adopt a *constructivist perspective*, social relationship are seen as subject to a radical contingency in all their elements, i.e. their situational goals, means, rules and value-pattern. For instance, the 'pure relationship' theorized by Giddens is seen in this way: the partners of a couple stay together until they can derive pleasure and satisfaction from their situational relationship.¹⁰ From the agency's point of view, relations are reduced to contingent exchanges and transactions. In a more radical version, they are reduced to communications and only to communications. In brief: the relations are seen as flows or *transactions* without specific qualities and without causal powers because they do not have their own structure. Consequently we cannot talk about relational goods (and relational evils) specifically produced by couples and families. The latter are assumed to be generic primary groups, which is not.¹¹

Within a constructivist approach, the relational goods and evils are not distinguishable any more, they mix up. Since reality is considered as a social and cultural construction, the good and the bad become subjective feelings: no more rules and deviances, but only processes and paradoxes, the sharing of problems, "a normal chaos of love".

b) In those relational approaches that adopt a *realist perspective* (not that one naïve, but *critical*), instead, the relationships create, willing or not, structures, which are networks of relationships. These networks are made up not only of communications, but of a much more consistent 'stuff'. Communications depend upon the web of relationships in which they occur. For instance, the relationship networks which form the families are born by flows of communications and transactions, but they emerge as a reality which goes well beyond the contents of the explicit communications and transactions. To give just an example, when a family has to decide where to go on holidays, and the members of the family make wholly different choices, one perceives that an agreed relationship is something at stake that exceeds not only their individual preferences, but also any possible combinations of them unless each one takes care first of all of their relationship as the good to be preserved. This reality is an emerging effect, that is a relational good (or bad, in case of failure), which, in its turn, induces positive or negative behaviours. Through these processes, virtues and/or vices are generated not only in the interior life of everyone, but in their relation as well. Consequently one can and has to speak of good and bad relationships, which are distinguishable not just on the basis of pre-established rules and deviances, rather than as products of a *sui generis* relational structure. The chaos of love is a structure, either one wants or not.

⁸ M. Archer (2012). *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ P. Donati (1989). *La famiglia come relazione sociale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

¹⁰ A. Giddens (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹¹ L.H. Walters (1982). 'Are Families Different from Other Groups?', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 44 (4), pp. 841-850.

One cannot understand a familiar dynamic if one does not intend it as an emerging effect from the same good or bad relationships which it produces. The family is not a group of aggregated individuals, it is a social relationship which emerges, if it emerges, from its own constitutive genome. It does not appear if it does not generate as such. The social genome of the family is a circumflex structure between four elements: the motivation of free giving, the rule of the reciprocity, the sexuality of the couple and the procreativity.¹² That which we call family in the demographic and social statistics is another thing, they are simply groups of individuals.

To see the family, one has to observe it “adequately”. Briefly: as one cannot see the virus with the naked eye one has to use an electronic microscope, likewise to see the relationships one needs a relational paradigm, which is our microscope. The relationship is not a simple exchange of things, so as water is not a transaction between hydrogen and oxygen. It is not even a type of channel in which the things which we exchange, for example the words I say to you and the glances that you have towards me. These words and glances build relationships that we cannot see, as we cannot see the light in the room. To see and understand the relationship one must put in act an operation of reflexivity, which means to go back on to what has come out from my previous interaction with the Other. We have to reflect upon the interactions that generate a new and irreducible reality on regards to the elements that they have generated.

This is the ‘being’ which is (inside) the relationship. The expression “being in relation” indicates a richness which is to be explored even more.

In order to manage the relationship one has to be reflexive in the sense of exercising both the personal and the relational reflexivity on the relationship itself. The couples nowadays are highly deficient exactly regarding this. They individualize each partners’ ‘*I/Self*’ rather than make it relational. This lead to generate relational evils. In order to activate relational goods, both partners should exercise one’s reflexivity regarding the couple relationship and redefine continuously one’s personal and social identity, which changes in time, within it.¹³

The postmodern society does not help us. It conceives of the couple as a foam bubble, like in the paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. Therefore an increasing number of couples are prey to what we call *impeded* or *fractured* forms of reflexivity. The partners are not able to integrate their personal and relational identity either in themselves or regarding the other.

On the other hand, ‘making a family’ means seeing and coping, that is living, a relationship of *We*, the *We-relation*, which consists in being part of a community of reference in which and from which depends one’s own well-being. But who is this *We*?

In my opinion, this ‘We’ is a family as “relational subject”¹⁴ that willingly or unwillingly create relational goods or relational evils.

4. One asks oneself: does the We of the family mean being part of a community which dominates the individual and compels the same to subdue, or is it a reality that makes it flourish through its own familiarly relation? Both types of outcomes are possible. This is precisely the distinction between the families who produce relational evils and those who produce relational goods. The family is a good relation and produces relational goods if and when it can do so in such a way as every individual can personalize one’s own role in the family network, which signifies to make it become a mature individual “relational subject”.¹⁵

¹² Cfr. P. Donati (2013). *La famiglia. Il genoma che fa vivere la società*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

¹³ Sasha Roseneil & Kaisa Ketokivi (2015), ‘Relational Persons and Relational Processes: Developing the Notion of Relationality for the Sociology of Personal Life’. *Sociology*, DOI: 10.1177/0038038514561295.

¹⁴ Precisely a collective relational subject: see P. Donati, M.S. Archer (2015). *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, part II.

¹⁵ P. Donati, M.S. Archer (2015). *The Relational Subject*, part I.

The relational subject is not the “plural subject” or the ‘*we think*’ of which someone refers to,¹⁶ neither is it a type of collective conscience.¹⁷ A collective conscience that thinks for each one of us in the family does not exist. There exists certainly a collective culture in the sense of a set of representations, images, styles of life which are shared by individuals and influence their agency. We, in fact, are immersed in this collective culture every day, inside and outside the family. However this does not mean that the We of the collective culture matches with our personal conscience. Least of all, that the We signifies that everyone thinks in the same way. Something alike can occur in tribal societies, where the individual reflexivity is highly dependent upon the clan socio-cultural structure.¹⁸

In order to understand the existence of a Self that stays freely in the contest of the We, we have to refer to the concept of *relational good*.¹⁹ The family members are a *We* to the extent, and in so far as they generate together a good which is born from their differences, it has to be compatible with the differences but also has to converge on a shared wellness in the liberty of everyone. This ‘good’ is anything that is done together (eating, doing a walk, going on holidays) or that requires the cooperation of each one (in the division of labour, in the decision-making process, etc.).

Here we verify the fact that in every moment of life we meet (or we collide) with the evidence of the differences (between the Self and the others, between the We on one side and the Other on the other side). The relationships either join us, but also differentiate us: they make us different inside the same We. This property of social relations, consisting in the fact that they unite the terms at the same time that they promote their differentiation, is what I call the ‘enigma of the relation’.²⁰ The relationship means distance, it says difference, and at the same time it say connection, link. Therefore we have to understand how the good that is in the We-relationship can be compatible with the differences between those who generate and take advantage of it.

Let us make an example. Only a mother or a father who are aware of the fact that the child is a person who was born from them, and therefore is part of their identity (of father and mother), but is in fact *the child of their relationship* and at the same time another person different to them, are truly ‘generative’. Those parents (women and men) who say “I want a child to fulfil myself” (that is in my child I find my identity) do not generate a different person from themselves, but they generate (or try to generate) a copy of themselves, that is they generate Another that has to realize their own ‘*I*’. The relationship is that of an identity which tries to possess the other. The Other becomes entirely subordinated in its identity. There is no real reciprocity between the parent and the child. The relationship is seen as narcissism, and the relational goods cannot be generated or are generated only partially and insufficiently.

In order to generate a relational good, the differences between the members of a family have to be managed in a certain way, i.e. they should be treated according to the norm of reciprocity. When this happens, one perceives the idea that love is knowing how to generate the different, to know it, offer it as a gift, live it as a gift. Love is not only a sentiment, it is a relationship of full reciprocity. In this and only in this relationship (the relationships are all different between them), the difference is not anymore a pure difference, it is not a split, but it is a relationship interpreted as an added value for whoever stays in that

¹⁶ On the ‘plural subject’ see M. Gilbert (2000). *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. On the ‘group belief’ see R. Tuomela (1991). ‘Group Beliefs’. *Synthese*, 91, pp. 285-318.

¹⁷ M. Douglas (1986). *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.

¹⁸ See the famous book by E. Durkheim on ‘*The elementary forms of the religious life*’ (1912). Something similar can happen also today in those ‘tribal settings’ which have been described by Michel Maffesoli.

¹⁹ Cfr. P. Donati, R. Solci (2011). *I beni relazionali. Che cosa sono e quali effetti producono*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

²⁰ P. Donati (2015). *L’enigma della relazione*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis edizioni.

relationship.²¹ It is a relational good which stays in the relationship, not outside it. If the difference becomes separated from the relationship that establishes the difference, we have the crises of who remains in the relation. The relationship stops being a meaningful difference and becomes a 'thing', it becomes reified, and generally it leads to degrade. One gives a label to the other person which reduces her to a thing. This takes place to us every day, when, instead of having a relationship of a 'I-You' kind with another person, one labels and *commodifies* the other person in the relationship of the 'I-It' kind.²² The relationship to the Other becomes a cliché. This happens when we give up to have confidence in the others and to cooperate with them because we consider them unable or unreliable. But there is another example of this, namely the reduction of the relationship, with its challenging differences, to a request for a recipe on how to behave. Take, for instance, a father who asks his friend what he has to say to his adolescent son about sexuality issues: he is simply reducing his problem of a good relationality with his son to a recipe of things to be reported to him.

Family life becomes a producer of relational goods if and when its members are able to manage their differences, and the related needs, 'relationally'. Relational goods are resources which consist of relationships, they are not material things or functional performances. One is now able to understand why the family is a common good not in as much as a public good, neither in as much as a private good, but in as much as a relational entity. A typology of social goods can be useful to understand better these differences.

If one classifies the social goods according to two axes: (i) the competitive/non-competitive character of the good, and (ii) the opportunity to choose/not-to-choose the good that one wants, we find four types of goods.

The public goods are those which are not competitive and which the persons cannot choose individually. The private goods, on the contrary, are competitive and can be chosen liberally. Different from these types there are the competitive goods which do not allow an individual choice (called secondary, *associative relational goods*), and the non competitive goods in which people are free to choose (called *primary relational goods*). The family is a primary relational good.

Precisely because the family is a non competitive good (it is a social form without functional equivalents), although the individual can choose between family and family, this social form can produce relational goods which the other social goods cannot create.

The family is a relational good (i) in itself for its members, given the fact that it can generate what other life styles cannot generate, and (ii) it is a relational good for the society because it develops functions that no other form of life can fulfil.

The literature regarding these arguments is exterminated. I should like here only to remember the fact that only the family produces the actual *primary social virtues*. The personal virtues are referred to the person as such, and their centre of indictment is the individual conscience. The social virtues are referred to the relationships between the people. The family is not just a place where the personal virtues are cultivated, but is also and above all *the social infungible operator which transforms the personal virtues in social virtues*.

Virtuous is the human person which is its subject. But the virtue can and must be referred also to the social relationships, and more generally to every intentional system of social action, like: to give and to receive trust, availability to the cooperation, reciprocity, responsibility. These primary social virtues are learned within the family or otherwise are never learned anymore. It is for this reason that we say that the family, based on the full reciprocity between the sexes and between the generations, is infungible, it does not have functional equivalents, it is the major social resource that the society can have. If a

²¹ P. Donati (2013). 'The added value of social relations', *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 5 (1), pp. 19-35 (available on-line).

²² The distinction between 'I-You' and 'I-It' is the one drawn by Martin Buber (1988). *The Knowledge of Man. Selected Essays*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International.

determined society consumes this resource, or even loses it, undergoes many and such difficulties that, in the long run, it cannot survive.

5. At worldwide level, the debate regarding the family is nowadays concentrated on a basic question: is the *natural* family ('normo-constituted', both nuclear and extended) still a resource for the people and for the society, or is, instead, a survival from the past which impedes the emancipation of the individuals and the advent of a freer, more equal, and happier society?

The empirical researches on the family as a social resource give interesting answers. They show that the natural family is above all a resource, instead of a restraint, for the wellbeing of the society.²³

1) *The couple and the marriage*. The empirical resources which have compared the effects of the different lifestyles on the people and on the society show that the married couples or orientated towards marriage are more generative of relational goods with regards to all the other forms.²⁴

2) *The relationships between the generations*. The families normo-established realize solidarity between the generations much more and better than the other forms of life. Children who live with their own parents benefit in their physical and psychological health, as well as they have major life expectancies, in regards to those who live in other contexts. The analysis of three different family structures, families with united parental couple's, recomposed families and the one-parent families, evidence the major fragility of these two last mentioned family structures. The breakage of the marital bond is related to a certain closure towards the external world and encourages an optimistic view of family life little inclined to assume responsibility towards the community. Particularly lacking is the capacity of the one-parent family to realize the cultural transmission and solidarity between generations, because these families who have to affront in solitude the challenges linked to the growth of the children, as well as the pressures in the workplace.

3) *Family and work*. The family is a relational good for the working world because it compensates the market failures and rectifies certain relational ills produced by the place of work (stress, etc.). The working world "exploits" the family-resources and those do not take account of sufficiency of the requirements of family life. From here the enormous difficulty of the families, especially those with more children, to harmonize family and professional life. It is necessary that the working world recognizes relational goods of the family and responds subsidiary to the family using those forms of reconciliation between family life and work in terms of time and adequate services.

4) *Family, civic participation and social capital*. The stable family is the source of primary capital of the society and it promotes responsible participation of the citizens to the public affairs. This fact is positively correlated to the number of children. The social capital consists in the relationships of trust, cooperation and reciprocity of the family which the family creates both internally (known as *bonding* social capital) and in those external networks, that is relationship, neighbourhood, friendship groups, associations (*bridging*) social capital. Consequently, the family is a resource of added social value not only because it forges better individuals under the profile of their health and their well-being, but also and

²³ A wide panorama of national and international researches is debated in the book P. Donati (ed.) (2012). *Famiglia risorsa della società*. Bologna: il Mulino. See also P. Donati and P. Sullins (eds.) (2015). *The Conjugal Family: An Irreplaceable Resource for Society*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

²⁴ P. Donati (2014), 'Why the Family Makes a Difference with Respect to Lifestyles,' *Anthropotes*, 30 (2), pp. 545 - 577.

above all in as much as it generates a woven community, that is a civil and public sphere, which requires rules and values of human life and thus promotes the common good.

These results lead to a very precise conclusion: *the natural family is and remains the vital source of the society*. The globalized society – in respect to the past – requires its presence more and more, and not just always less, because of *the multiple role of meditation* which the family is called to accomplish in order to get both a better quality of life for the people and the development of the personal and social virtues.

One can say that nowadays a new historical phase is opening, after the *deinstitutionalization* of the family. One can prospect the possibility that the changes underway can generate structures and relational structures that give a new institutional sense to the family.²⁵

One has to take note that on the empirical level in as much as the family can suffer mutations, its *constitutive genome* does not cease to be the *fons et origo* of the society. Without this genome the society loses the quality and its own power of that living organism (fundamental cell) that, instead of being a burden for the society constitutes the primarily factor of humanization of the persons and of the social life.

The positive qualities of the family manifest themselves particularly in families where there are vulnerable or disabled members, because in those are activated special needs in management of the person in difficulty. These families develop special virtues, which one can call (*empowerment*) and of (*resilience*). From such virtues deriving the social advantages which the family with disabled members or not self-sufficient offer to the society, in as much as the commitment which the family poses in the rehabilitation and social inclusion of the person in difficulty in all of the social spheres from school to work signifies, believing in the possibility of social recovery of the most vulnerable and marginalized. Another example of families which generate goods for the whole society is given from the adoptive families and foster families.

6. In conclusion. Contrarily to what most mass-media propagate as shared public opinion, the empirical research states that the nuclear family is the primary source of the society and remains the vital source of those societies which are more bearers of the future. The reason for which is simple: it is from the family that originates the primary social capital needed by society. The civil capital of the society is generated by the social virtues of the family, which has no functional equivalent. The globalized society can find a future civility if and to the extent that it will be capable of promoting a relational culture of the family able to rethink family life as the vital link between private well-being and public happiness.

Operationally it means recognizing *a new culture regarding family rights* based upon the principle that families can develop their tasks, and build trust and social solidarity, they must have access to their own rights. This means *to recognize the citizenship rights of the family*. Families should be considered subjects of a social citizenship pertaining to them as such. The family is a social subject which as its own complex of rights and duties in the political and civil community because of the irreplaceable mediations that it actually exerts.

The political and social systems can be evaluated according to the type and grade of promotional recognition which are given to the family in as much as social subject which generates relational goods. One must admit that most political-social systems, instead of valuating and promoting the families as producers of individual and social goods, penalize them, because they do not recognize their social functions. This explains the decline in the birth rate, the ageing of the population, the fragmentation of the families and the woven community, and in general a series of social and psychological pathologies.

²⁵ Michael Gilding (2000). 'Reflexivity over and above convention: the new orthodoxy in the sociology of personal life, formerly sociology of the family'. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61 (4), pp.757-777.

Social policies can be defined as family friendly provided that they have as a focal purpose the *making of the family*, and they don't limit themselves only to pursue general purposes of well-being for the population, even if nobles and positive, such as the fight against poverty or the reduction of unemployment. The latter are implicit and indirect with respect to family relationships, and quite often they do not promote the family as such. Therefore cannot be automatically be defined as support and promotion of the social value of the family. Family policy requires specific *direct and explicit* measures in favour of the family potentials to produce its relational goods. A policy is familiar if it aims explicitly to support the social functions and the added social value of the family as social capital. Concretely, the reconciliation policies between the family and work should be implemented according to the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity.