

I will not leave you orphans

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One aspect which increasingly characterises our western societies, and not simply in the aftermath of the pandemic, is a feeling of being orphaned. That also seems to be a feature of the global reality if we think for a moment of the millions refugees and migrants, of the vast number of poor people, of the street children and the 17% of the world's population suffering from hunger. Who cares for them out with what is being done by individual people and NGOs?

In the early 1960s, the German psychoanalyst, Alexander Mitscherlich, along with others, spoke of "a society without fathers" where the notion of a paternal figure had faded from sight. It is a significant phenomenon and one worth reflecting upon. Here, however, we will focus on something which is much larger and much more fundamental: with the break-up of what constituted the traditional fabric of society and the family, more and more people, from young people searching for work to the elderly, to parents returning home in the evening from work stressed out, many find themselves living with a great inner loneliness: who cares about me? who will listen to me? who will help me when I have problems? where am I truly "at home" and who can I really count on?

It makes one wonder about the fact that one in three families in Italy is made up of only one person and that people living on their own number about 8 million (data: *Istat*). 13% of people say that they have no one to whom they can turn to when things are difficult. In Great Britain in 2018 it was felt there was the need to set up a government ministry for loneliness.

Against this background, Pope Francis posed a remarkable question to the bishops of Mexico: "has the need been diluted or even forgotten for that place of rest so ardently desired by the hearts of Mexicans entrusted to your care?" He followed it up with a vibrant appeal: "For this reason I invite you to begin anew from that need for a place of rest which wells up from the spirit of your people" and in particular, of "the need to offer a maternal place of rest to young people. May your vision be capable of meeting theirs, loving them" (13 February 2016).

This does not mean encouraging a stepping back to some sort of childish state of mind. The truth is that all of us have an immense need to have a father and mother, to know we are enveloped, protected, welcomed by someone and accompanied, to have a family and a home.

It is also against this backdrop that the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* and the actual Year of *Amoris laetitia* which this issue of *Ekklesia* is dedicated appears to be very appropriate. The value here is not simply as a revisiting of ecclesial documents or commemorating an anniversary, but it can become an opportunity to ask ourselves fundamental questions: what can we do, in the midst of unavoidable failings, to make it possible that more people can experience the joy of a family? And how can we accompany the young and young couples on this journey to be people who stand with those who suffer the destruction of their hopes and dreams for their life? What are the ways in which a pastoral service can help families feel accompanied and be “homes”?

This is what this issue will try to deal with through reflections, analysis, interviews and experiences. If on the one hand we focus on the real situation facing marriage and the family in society today, on the other we can gain inspiration from examples of saintly couples, still largely unacknowledged, and the forms of consecrated life which are inspired by the model of the family of Nazareth.

It is by starting with families and care for the family that we can hope to build a society in which the sense of being orphaned will not prevail but rather we can experience a sense of being woven together and feel we are brothers and sisters “at home”.