
EVANGELIZATION OF FAMILIES AT THE SALESIAN CENTER IN BRATISLAVA

Mária Bučková, Ladislav Bučko* and Mária Hardy

*St. Elizabeth University, St. John Paul II Institute of Missiology and Tropical Health,
Palackého 1, Bratislava, Slovakia*

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Abstract

This article points to the importance of evangelizing families. It gives a Christian view of marriage and family, points out the problems and needs of the present family, and looks for the origins of the evangelization of families. Empirical research focuses on the search for factors of family evangelization in the Salesian Centre in Petržalka. The research was conducted through a qualitative research strategy using open card analysis techniques. Among the basic found factors of family evangelization are the community of families, the cooperation of Salesians with families and families among themselves, the activities of the Centre, and the spiritual accompaniment.

Keywords: family, evangelization, spirituality, community, cooperation

1. Introduction

The family is by far the most important social group, and it is the common feature of diverse cultures and civilizations. It is currently experiencing one of the greatest crises in the history of mankind. In Slovakia, the Christian understanding of the family is still a cultural pattern, as 75% of the population calls for Christianity [1]. Young people come to Bratislava for study or work from all over Slovakia; they are mostly brought up in the Christian faith. After a time, they are setting up a family and many are looking for the opportunity and space to spend their free time in the Christian spirit. Such a space is offered by the Salesian Centre in Petržalka, where our research on the evangelization of families visiting this centre took place. The Salesian society is especially devoted to the education of youth, has its own pedagogy based on the so-called 'Preventive System'. Salesian evangelization focuses on the complete families, single-parent families, divorced families and singles who are planning to start a family. A spiritually strong family enshrined in marriage is an important factor for its stability [2].

The Missiology Department of St. Elizabeth University in Bratislava is involved in research project on evangelization of families in Petržalka – the biggest housing estate of capital Bratislava. In the article, we present results of

*Corresponding author, e-mail: misia@vssvalzbety.sk

the particular research on evangelization of families in the Salesian pastoral centre in this large urban estate.

2. The family and its challenges

The family is an intimate domestic group of people related to one another by bonds of blood, sexual mating, or legal ties. It has been a very resilient social unit that has survived and adapted through time. Ingoldsby defines the family as a social arrangement based on marriage including recognition of rights and duties of parenthood, common residence for husband, wife and children are reciprocal economic obligations between husband and wife [3]. In all societies, the family is the premier institution for all of the following: socialization of children, adult intimate relationships, lifelong economic support and cooperation, and continuity of relationships along the life course.

Family and marriage are currently experiencing a wave of criticism, even to be considered an anachronism. Enhanced relativism, individualism and materiality reduced marriage to a private affair without responsibility and commitment to society. The laws of many countries support the decline of the family by its standards, which make it easy to achieve divorce, generously authorized abortion, euthanasia, contraception prevention, insufficient protection of families with more children, and so on. There were almost 1 million divorces in 2011 in Europe Union; it is nearly one divorce for two marriages [4]. Increasingly, as single-parent families, same-sex unions, cohabitation without marriage, serial monogamy, and households based on friendship rather than sexual partnerships are becoming both more numerous and more visible to the public eye in Euro-American societies, established ideas about the 'natural' family are being challenged. Despite that in a 2011 Slovakia Bureau of the Census were 76 % of family-based marriage, 7.9 % of family-based cohabitation and 16.1 % of single parent family [1, p. 46]. When it comes to the importance of the family, in the 2006 World Values Survey 94% of Americans said family is very important - 93% in Great Britain, 93% in Italy, 92% in Sweden, 89% in Spain, 87% in Finland, 86% in France, 82% in Germany [5].

Participants in the 2011 *Family Demographic Family Summit and the Future of Humankind* have highlighted the worrying concerns of the family institution, including family destruction - marital and parental roles based on traditional family values, impairment of the reproductive function of the family, the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, contraceptive thinking (in terms of safe sex) and destructive premarital and extramarital sexual patterns, widespread divorce, rising cohabitation without marriage, an increasing number of single parent families, the wave of social deviations (abortion, homosexuality, paedophilia, drug addiction, prostitution, pornography), suspension of relations among relatives and alienation of different generations within the same family, etc. The summit also called for an end to interfering with the private life of the family under the pretext of so-called 'planned parenthood', 'protection of the rights of the child' and 'gender equality'. The

birth control policy has been identified as a threatening human race and a means of discrimination against the family [6].

According to several studies of the sociologists (Matulník, Kollár, Pastor, Ritomský, Piwowarski) child religiosity is closely linked to religiosity of parents. Respondents whom had prayed more often in their childhood and youth at home in the family, were more likely to have fully practiced their faith as adults. Similarly, it reflected the impact of parents' participation in the mass. In the area of family life and reproductive behaviour occurred very positive impact of religiosity. Believers attributed a higher value to marriage and to a greater extent reject extramarital sexual relations. They have higher rates of fertility and proposed a greater rejection of abortion [7]. An adverse outcome for the family religiosity can be considered the weak participation of fathers in transmitting the faith in the family and the participation in mass. More than half of the fathers went to mass less than once a week and children learn to pray especially from mothers and grandmothers. The relatively high proportion of believers feel interrelatedness with parish community, do not read regularly Scripture and other religious literature and they are subject to the influence of spiritualism and esotericism. Other less favourable is the fact that permissive attitudes of believing adult population in Slovakia, to cohabitation and sexual relations of underage is confirmed by data from surveys that were conducted in 2003, 2006, 2008 and 2014 [7, p. 348].

3. Evangelization of families

Evangelization, according to the papal document *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, means bringing the Good News of salvation to all mankind, to transform people inwardly and to create a new humanity [8]. Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, speaks about the role of evangelization of families: "The Church is really to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is unchangeable and ever new in the very families who live in the conditions of the modern world and are called to accept God's plan that concerns them and to live according to it." [9] According to the Exhortation the first evangelizers in the family are Christian spouses and to fulfil this role enable them the present of sacrament marriage, which this exhortation called the charismatic gifts [9]. Parents have the privilege to create with God a new being that would not be here without them. They can be an example, to shape it, to sow her love and understanding.

The church in evangelization counts the families, because it lives among them. The family is a missionary community where faith, hope and love are transmitted. Pope Francis encourages and says that the family through its cross and possible drought could become a place for the connection of the human heart, which is thirsty for the love of God, because it is on the cross that Christ gave us himself as a source of living water [10].

The Church is always looking for ways to bring the people of our time the Good News. Bučko conceives evangelization as a complex activity and among the basic methods includes testimony, preaching, catechesis, liturgy and the

sacraments, personal contact, street evangelization, elements of popular piety, evangelization by the mass media and art, work in small groups and movements, evangelization and animation courses [11]. Individual evangelistic methods are connected to each other and often intertwined. The resort on Mamatyova street in Petržalka is significantly represented by evangelization especially families with small groups, liturgy and sacraments, as well as by the courses. There are also various initiatives for the spiritual formation of families: married recollections, married meetings, meetings of family communication, gathering of the sons and daughters, mothers' prayers, fathers' prayers, pilgrimages of men, etc. The big challenge is to strengthen the preparation for marriage, as well as the interdependence of pastoral youth and families, which can be called remote preparation for the sacrament of marriage.

Significant is the apostolate of families themselves. This is the formation of small communities of families, where family members' faith can mature. There is currently manifested missionary dimension of evangelization of families because the community who are struggling with the Word of God and prayer will automatically feel the need not to close, and is looking for opportunities to serve externally. Families are involved in service during a mass and organize various events in the parish (exchange clothing and toys, trips, family camps, carnival and so on), through which manifests concrete help in difficulties especially for young people and large families.

4. Salesian Centre in Petržalka

Petržalka is the largest housing estate of Bratislava built during the communist political regime in the former Czechoslovakia in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century. Today it has about 130 thousand inhabitants. The population consists mostly of young families who have found the cheaper housing here. After the change of political regime in 1989, a hunger for spiritual values emerged in Slovakia. There were growing spiritual groups and movements, and male and female religious communities. Salesians of Don Bosco received from the democratically elected local government in Bratislava - Petržalka land, on which they built a pastoral centre for children, youth and families. Gradually, the brothers set up a collaboration with the Salesian sisters (FMA), which also began work at the centre. The centre is an extended space for evangelization, especially young families have found it a suitable environment for the formation of their youngest children.

Large space for families is created every Sunday during the so-called Child's Mass. This means that the preaching is adapted for children, including scenes to elucidate the Gospel. The whole family is involved in different services through the liturgy.

Salesians offer retreats for the spiritual growth of family, which are held once a month in the centre and spiritual exercises separately for men and women outside the centre. During the school year adults are being prepared for the sacraments that animate married couples in collaboration with the priests. Other

offers include courses of evangelization for parents and children, courses on parenting and raising children, as well as courses aimed at finding vocation - Marriage Course.

The family groups – small communities of families are very relevant in the evangelization process. It is a meeting of couples (according to the situation with their children) who are focused on growth in faith-sharing, prayer and service. There are several such groups formed from married couples who attend the centre.

‘Mamatko’ is a room for mothers with little children, where they can exchange experiences, encouraged to grow spiritually and have fun with children. It offers activities aimed at all-round development of children, discussion and educational activities for parents: workshops for children, playful English, breastfeeding support groups, meetings with experts. Here are also held the ‘Mother’s prayers’ once a week. Playground is another space that Salesians offer to families. Especially mothers on maternity leave use it in the morning and afternoon. It is not only a run area for children, but also serves to evangelize through interviews, mutual understanding, prayers of mothers which are happening during the good weather on the playground.

5. Methodology and results of empirical research

The subject of the research is to find factors of evangelization of families that takes place in the Salesian Centre on Mamatyova street in Petržalka, Bratislava. We aimed to explore and describe these factors involved in the evangelization of families.

The research was conducted by qualitative research strategy. For the purposes of the research, we have chosen analytical design of ‘open cards’, for which we used the technique of open coding and subsequent categorization codes. The main research method of data collection was a semi-structured interview.

The research sample of participants was divided into two research groups. The first group consists of representatives of families who attend the Salesian Centre. Questions for families corresponded to 17 participants, of which two were married couples and 15 mothers of families. The second group included five Salesians and nuns (two priests, a deacon and two sisters FMA). Overall, the talks were attended by 22 participants.

By analysing the first group of interviews with representatives of families attending the Salesian Centre, we have reached the following categories and subcategories (Table 1). By analysing the second group of interviews with representatives of Salesians and nuns working at the Salesian Centre, we have obtained the categories and subcategories from Table 2.

At this point, we summarized the research results on the factors of family evangelization. Examples of answers of participants regarding concerned factors are written in italics. Found results regarding the main research question are presented below.

Table 1. Encoding participants answers in the first group.

Category	Subcategory	Code
Offer of evangelization	Spiritual-instructional offerings	children's Holy Mass on Sundays, family meetings, carolling, spiritual renewal for families, spiritual retreats for men and women, mother prayers, confession, adoration, courses: Discovering Christ, Following Christ, Effective Parenthood
	Sport-fun deals	playground, children's afternoon clubs, flying a kite, carnival, ball
	Mixed and other offers	oratory, family camp, boy's camp, girls' camp, voluntary work, Open Doors Day, Mother's centre, forest feast, children's groups
Salesian's influence on families	Community	community building, community importance, second home, new acquaintance, co-ownership, safety, experience of faith, testimony, educational environment, family problem solving
	Spiritual dimension	spiritual formation, continuity of faith, consolidation of faith, education in the Christian spirit, regular participation in Sunday worship, spiritual guidance, formation of boys, path to faith
Families experience	Positive	the presence of Salesians, the advantage of near-living, community, trust in Salesians, safe environment, experience of the faith, invitation, testimony, encouragement, concrete help, co-responsibility, engagement of the whole family, openness, warmth, spirituality
	Negative	age limitation of boys group, secretiveness, closeness, missing trips, lack of connection, criticism without motivation
Families Challenges	Needs	mutual assistance, intergenerational solidarity, enjoyment of activities
	Paths of convergence	openness to new ones, notice of others needs, tutoring, addressing, invitation, feeling welcome, trips
Engagement of families		organization of the Mother centre and family camp, educational-pastoral plan, reaching new families

5.1. Community of families

Through the Centre, Salesians have created a community of families which is multigenerational. It creates opportunities for mutual enrichment of families and exchange of experience in the transmission and living of the Gospel. This community is also a natural environment and education for the

training of marriage. Young people have the opportunity of mutual meetings and getting familiar with a variety of activities and services with others.

P6: "We live in a community, where we have close people to share with questions of faith. The community helps us a lot, where we attend the small groups. It is the community that we belong that we can share with those people, whom we reach when we have problems. Just community."

P3: "In the Centre I meet people with whom I would never meet in my normal life, suddenly they are my friends. Our only family are the families from the Centre. It has brought me closer to Christ."

Table 2. Encoding participants answers in the second group.

Category	Subcategory	Code
Family orientation	Community	family pastoralism, background, pro-family
	Activity	help, service, great offer, education
Offers to families	Spirituality	communion, groups, spiritual renewal, spiritual accompaniment, spiritual exercises, confession, preparation for the sacraments
	Specific programs	effective parenting course, events, Mamatko group, courses, family camp
	Apostolate	self-help, sharing, engagement
Challenges of Salesians	Family needs	home, education, spiritual maturing
	Engagement	collaborators, children's Mass team, tutors, evangelization of Petržalka

5.2. Family alone

Every family is an evangelization factor itself, and that is a unique benefit. The simplest form of evangelization is the very presence of the family in the community of families and their testimony. A family receives and transmits the experience of faith inside and outside.

P4: "The form of apostolate. Even to come to the Centre with the whole family and to be a witness for youth and to create informal relations."

P3: "And I also feel a great chance at the playground in Salesians, where come the mums which do not go to the Holy Mass, but they like the playground or the atmosphere on the field. We try to establish a contact, draw them among us to make them feel at home."

5.3. Engagement of families

It regards the involvement of families in the service for others and cooperation. For example, a young couple as mentors lead small communities of

young people, which aims to find a vocation, marriage preparation, to testify the life in the family. Some spouses prepare people for the sacraments.

P1: *“We want to develop a commitment to let people know that the Church it is not reserved to priests or religious, but there are people who want to make their faith a living way, and not so secretly, but also externally, to focus on the activities so that people can grow in faith, in relationship with God and with other people. Something is specific in this Centre, formation and accompaniment of Salesians co-workers particularly. These are people who generally have their families and somehow share their gifts and abilities in this Centre.”*

P20: *„The challenge for families from the Centre is to invite other families of Petržalka. It can be seen on the Open Day. When new families come in, families from the Centre are not yet ready enough to talk to them and invite them. There is space for families to come out of their shell.”*

5.4. Small communities of children and youth

The Centre offers healthy social and spiritual environment for small peer groups, where the human and spiritual formation of children and young people takes place, which is an important factor in the evangelization of families. In these communities friendships are formed and the youth are guided to the Christian values.

P7: *“I see this also from the practical point of view, that I can find the spiritual growth there. I think that as a family we can spend there our free time in a safe, good environment, without swearing.”*

P3: *„I think it’s for them an attractive environment, and they receive the faith in such a non-violent way from Salesians. And indeed children from non-Christian families often come to believe.”*

5.5. Activities of the Centre

According to statements of both groups participants, from the activities and actions of the Centre benefits families visiting the Centre. Indeed they connect generations and create fertile ground for the growth of relationships in families and beyond. We can mention for example the Open Day event at the Feast of Saint Dominic Savio, when come families who do not participate in regular activities offered by the Centre, such as the celebration of the Eucharist on a Sunday or a weekday, oratory youth, etc.

P18: *“What belongs to our charisma. This is the familiarity and family atmosphere that Don Bosco offered and the educational environment that it created. It is not possible to create a healthy educational environment for our children and coming young people without families. We perceive it as a very important community of families that belong here, they are part of Centre.”*

P12: *“The family camp spiritually helped our family a lot. At first I was just a little helping here, but through the camp we have got the experience with my husband, that nothing was in our hands but in the hands of God.”*

P16: *“When there is a brigade, a lot of people come. I see that it is not indifferent to them that it doesn’t belong only to the Salesians, but it is for all.”*

5.6. Spiritual ministry and accompaniment

The pastoral care (Sacraments and pastoral counselling) is carried out in the Centre by a Salesian priest, to the accompaniment service are supplemented by friars or sisters, or trained lay collaborators. This ministry forms the basis of families’ evangelization, because they are the source from which other evangelistic activities are based, and also resources which nourish the evangelization of families.

P13: *“We take the retreats, which are once a month for families. I commend that because our children can play there and we can be thus spiritually fulfilled a little.”*

P20: *“Evangelization comes with upbringing, to help young people and families get to know Jesus Christ, get to a relationship with Him through the sacraments, preaching, for children rather through the rings, play rooms, and by an example of a good life.”*

5.7. Weaknesses and challenges

Families are missing one more open centre for young boys less than eight years old. This was one of the major negative views of the participants when answering the interview. For example, girls can attend the proposed events from six years old - participation in small communities of children, leisure activities, etc. Another challenge for this centre is the fact that Salesians are not open to cooperation with other Christian communities, religious, groups, but they are strongly bound only with the Salesian spiritual environment and the Salesian community.

P7: *„Well, it is a bit strict here; they take the boys from the third year of school. I must say that we have suffered as a young family with three boys to get an active input in the Centre.”*

Missing connectivity of communities and a certain closeness is the obstacle.

P9: *“We felt the secretivity of the Centre from the beginning. I used to come to the saint Mass every day and I wanted to talk to someone, but everybody went to the team of their friends.”*

P3: *„In this issue I can see that there are people divided into groups of younger families and those who still do not have children, they do not know where to engage. Then there are the older families and founding families of Centre with their own community. They should be connected each other.”*

6. Conclusions

The research shows that the Salesian Centre in Petržalka has seen a shift in evangelization, closely focused on development of children and youth, but now focused on the promotion of a whole family. The obtained factors of the evangelization of families confirm this fact. The Salesian community is trying to use the available means of evangelization to support the whole family. It is the collaboration of several components of the Salesian family and lay activists.

However, the research results cannot be generalized because they concerned the tributary area of the Salesian Centre. This is the most important limit of the research. However, they open up space for an important debate aimed at evangelization of families through the small Christian communities of families and the holistic accompaniment of families. This holistic approach involves addressing the diverse family problems, social and spiritual crises that families are currently threatening and forced to face. The research shows that Christian communities should focus on specific counselling aimed in bringing families together and activities involving spiritual-social upbringing of families.

The evangelization activity of Salesians in Petržalka has been developing for nearly 25 years and specifically through the Centre for eighteen years. Examining the impact of the Salesian community on families has brought us results that point to the effects of evangelization. In the first place, the participants pointed out the importance of the community and its positive influence on spiritual life. People find spiritual upbringing here, and parents enjoy a good educational environment that shapes and strengthens the faith so that the evangelists become the witnesses. Based on the experience of families with the Centre's activity, we can say that Salesians create a safe environment. The participants at the research appreciated the groups of families as a small community. The benefit of this research is also to reveal the negative experiences of families visiting the Salesian Centre. It is mainly about the closeness of old members of the groups towards new members who would like to join. The main discovery of our research is the shift of Salesian evangelization, closely focused on the education of children and youth, to a wider, family-oriented level with an attempt to build up the communities of families which accepted Gospel values.

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