

Somos familia

A family is not just a mom, a dad, 2.5 kids, and a dog. Extending family relationships changes how we think about faith, church, social justice, and God.

It's impossible to fully understand God. So humans come up with metaphors to try to explain our conviction of a loving God who holds us in community with each other. These images are rooted in our own experiences and cultures; the biblical image of God as a shepherd may not be as meaningful to people living in cities today.

For professor Nichole Flores, one of the most powerful metaphors to understand God and the church is family. Like other theological metaphors, this stems from her own experiences; she grew up in a large extended family, and Latino/a culture places a strong focus on family relationships. These families include not just nuclear families that live under one roof, but also the complex web of extended family and the family relationships that are created through the sacraments between people who aren't related by blood.

Flores believes not only that families offer a glimpse into God, but that they also inspire justice. If we can think of the global community as a large, extended family, and if families are where our identities are formed, then "the metaphor of family suggests that our identities are challenged by the needs of those beyond our own home," she says. "It invites us to take on others as our own needs and our own challenges."

Why use families as a metaphor to talk about our faith?

Latino/a theology, as an offshoot of liberation theology, is really interested in looking at experience as a starting point for theological reflection. As I began to study liberation theology and get really immersed in Latino/a theology, I started reflecting on my own experience of being a part of a really big extended family.

My grandparents on my father's side have 12 children, and all of those children have children. Just on that side of my family, I have 35 cousins. As we continue to expand, our diversity—in terms of politics, economics, and even race/ethnicity—continues to grow.

Families are places of nurture for us. We form our identities in conversation with our families. But families are also a place where we encounter difference constantly. If families are a place where we learn to love unconditionally, they are also a training ground for working out the identity tensions that happen in larger, public settings.

That experience of family was so formative for me—and not just for me, but for many, many people from all different communities. And as a result, my theology is rooted in my experience of extended family that emerges from my context within a Latino/a community.

Families are central in human experience. Putting families front and center means we start thinking about



Courtesy of Nichole Flores

The editors interview

Nichole Flores

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia

Recipient, Catherine Mowry LaCugna Award, Catholic Theological Society of America (2015)

individuals in fundamental relationship to the community. It resists an ethic that stresses autonomy, and it says that relationality is central.

What does your experience as a Latina woman bring to a theology of family?

Latino/a families extend beyond the idea of a nuclear family. It's broadly accepted in United States culture that a family is a mother, a father, 2.5 kids, and maybe a dog. But I see a real value in thinking about family as extending beyond our own household.

Of course I want to stress that there's a very special relationship between people who live together within a household community. There's a very special role for marriage and other particular commitments within the life of the church. But the Latino/a

experience of extended family is also very expansive; it moves beyond its own borders to incorporate people who maybe don't have families of their own, or who aren't particularly nourished or taken care of by their own families.

It's so beautiful to think about the responsibility of bringing up children as a communal one; even the most dedicated parents need help. In my own experience of family, I've become *comadre* (mother together) to a woman who isn't Latina, through the fact that I'm a *madrina* (godmother) to her son. This relationship takes our cultures, which are different, and puts them into encounter with each other as I support her in raising this little human.

My godson has recently developed this inexplicable interest in Guadalupe, even though this isn't particularly part of his culture. And so we already see

the ways in which our commitment to each other as family has started to expand our understandings of what it means to be human, to be in community, and our responsibilities to each other and to the common good.

The idea that Latino/a people parent together and see family as extending beyond biological belonging is nothing new. But it has really neat potential for thinking about the ways people come to encounter each other in the larger society. When family is understood in this broad way, it becomes a resource for expanding community—and the love and care and concern of communities—beyond ourselves and our particular household units.

Pope Francis' thinking in *Laudato Si'* does a really good job of getting at this. His use of the family metaphor throughout the encyclical isn't surprising, given

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his Latin American context and the family imagery in Catholic social teaching. One of the major contributions of his papacy will be the new ways in which he illuminates the family metaphor for us.

One of the ways we see this happening is when he uses the metaphor to describe a sense of belonging to God, to each other, and to the earth. This mutual belonging stresses the role of charity as an orienting virtue for our social relationships.

Catholics think a lot about justice. And justice is very important. But it's the bare minimum of what we need in order to flourish as human beings. Pope Francis is pressing us beyond justice to think about love as our motivation for social action.

Alejandro García-Rivera is a Latino theologian who passed away a few years ago. He argues that beauty is that which moves the human heart. If he were alive today, he'd be so pleased to see Pope Francis really incorporating this thinking into his teachings on the global common good and family. We owe things to each other because we're related, but we're moved to give these things to one another by a deep sense of love and affection.

We're moved by the beauty of God's image in all of humanity and a sense of being family with all who are created in God's image. This beauty and sense of family inspires us to

cultivate a more just world where people can flourish regardless of where they are in the world.

What does this look like in practice?

I think that family as a metaphor can help resist some of the hardening of hearts to social injustice that can so easily happen as the result of the deluge of information we get from social media.

It's easy to think about social injustice in the abstract. But children make suffering more concrete; they bring all these issues to the surface. This has come up in some workshops I've done on compassion and Syrian migrants and refugees. Many of us have seen the image of the 3-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, who drowned and washed up on the beach in Turkey. That image is devastating for anyone who loves a child.

This image brought awareness to the refugee crisis for about a month. Then within the world of social media, which can be so fickle, more images of drowned children came to light and they didn't cause the same amount of heartbreak, even though they were very similar. The problem hasn't gone away.

Familial thinking can help keep suffering in view and change how we think about them. It's so hard to be constantly in the mode of mourning and lament. It's hard to constantly feel

deep compassion for people who are suffering around the world without becoming discouraged, as can happen when we encounter this suffering primarily through social media.

Are there any downsides to using family as a metaphor?

We know from the Second Vatican Council that there are many metaphors for church and each one has strengths and limitations.

Family is one really useful metaphor that helps highlight our belonging to one another and instructs us how we can extend love and care beyond our particular self, or even beyond our immediate family. But that doesn't mean that each one of us isn't entitled to have some sort of say in our own lives, some sort of agency that is worthy of respect based on our human dignity.

Thomas Aquinas, in his teachings about justice and the common good, says that it doesn't make sense to think about a community as separate from or transcending the individual parts of the community. The good of the community—the common good—depends on the good of the individuals within it.

Does the balancing act between communal and individual good ever get distorted?

This is a problem that needs to be raised even as we celebrate the renaissance of the family metaphor in Catholic social teaching and in the lives of our parishes: Family isn't always good news to people.

There are so many people who are estranged from their families. And there are also people who experience subjugation within their family, marginalization within their family, or have demands placed upon them by their family members that are unjust.

I've been concerned with the romanticization of the family, that the use of the metaphor doesn't really get

at the harm that is frequently done to family members who are too vulnerable to stand up for their own interests.

Is there a way that we can talk about justice within families that undergirds both the theological richness of family and also the practical challenges of family?

The language of owing things to one's family needs to be framed within the concept of justice. One does not owe things to the family that are harmful. Families sometimes inconvenience you. My mom doesn't even live in the same city that I'm in, but she sometimes calls asking me to do things for my family. It's inconvenient, but this is my mother who sacrificed so deeply so that I could live and thrive, so I do it.

I'm happy to let my family impose on me, because they're family, but what if I was being asked to do things that were really harmful to myself or to people around me? Can we say that there are limits to the things family members can expect from one another?

In her book *Out of the Depths* (Augsburg Fortress), Ivone Gebara criticizes the ways that women, as she says, "have been trained to orient themselves not to God, but to men."

She argues that women have been trained to repudiate ourselves in order to take care of the men in our families. This is really indicting and powerful; she goes so far as to say that masculinity has become idolatrous. Women are being trained to serve first men and then God. It shouldn't be that way. God should come first.

How should the church respond to the misunderstandings of family?

Part of a response would be: Are we offering resources for women to recognize their personal dignity within the context of family and relationships?

This is a very complicated issue on the ground. I was once involved with a Hispanic-serving parish that trained women to be involved in

community organizing. But the meetings would always include their husbands, even if they weren't involved with that community. Partially, this was a matter of cultural respect; the women felt really uncomfortable doing something that could be perceived as threatening their husbands. So this particular community allowed the meetings to be run like this as a pastoral move, a way of creating space so the women could feel comfortable.

But it had the residual effect of saying, "Well, this woman can't act outside of her family without the permission of her husband." That's the bigger issue. Are we offering that space and resources for women to be encouraged to do otherwise?

Whether within preparation for marriage, the context of confession, or other times, the church needs to offer

idolatry of our own authority and our own power within the family context?

How can the church respond pastorally to situations where some members of the family have drastically more power?

I have a nickname within my extended family: Dr. Mija (*mija* means "my daughter"). Even though I have a Ph.D. from Boston College, in their eyes I still have the status of a younger daughter. How do I have a conversation about my place in my family without upsetting the dynamics of authority, not only with the older men in my family but also with elder women who, honestly, have more authority than I do because they've seen a lot more than I have? Someday, in this vision of family, I, too, will have that wisdom of lived experience. Even

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opportunities for women to realize, "I have dignity. I have worth. I, too, am important to God, not just the other members of my family—whether my husband, my sons, or even other, more powerful women. My concerns matter."

Are we creating the pastoral space for that? Some parishes are, but not all. It's sort of hit or miss, which is frightening.

Are we challenging powerful members of families—whether husbands, sons, or very powerful women within families—or even more economically privileged people within families to give up some of their own privilege? How can we orient the entire family, not on individual members but to God, in order to resist the temptation of

though I've read a lot of books, the lived experience will come later.

Some people live in situations where questioning family power dynamics is more than awkward—it can be dangerous. What is the church doing to advocate for transformations within families?

I know a lot of people have problems with such activities, but one thing that I've been really compelled by is men's breakfasts or discussion groups, where men are challenged to think about their baggage. Are they honoring their wives? What does that mean?

Again, pastorally, how well this plays out differs from parish to parish. In reality, who knows what's being reaffirmed within our institutional

structures. Potentially, parish practices can be really powerful. Are we creating a culture where men are being called to challenge their own power and authority and be held accountable?

How does the church help build strong communities?

I love it when our liturgies, communities, and churches really stress the importance of all of us supporting those who are married or supporting our young people as they're being formed in the faith as a wider community.

Baptism is being accepted and offered grace as a child of God. It brings us into a larger church family, but it also creates sacramental relationships between families. When you agree to be somebody's godmother or godfather, it creates a relationship and makes it real in the life of the church.

Even the act of attending someone's wedding creates family relationships. Sometimes we think of wedding invitations as a sign that someone likes you. But they're really a sign that this person wants you to witness the promise they are making to their spouse in front of God, and they want your help.

There's something about sacraments that's crucial to understanding how this metaphor of extended family works theologically. Family isn't just any old metaphor, it is one that is really firmly rooted in how we live as a church.

I'm hoping that my work on family will offer a new way to think about the metaphor. The church is at risk of seeing ourselves as separate: "I go to church," not, "I am the church." Stressing our sacramental belonging both to God and to each other is an important contribution of this particular metaphor and keeps it from being distorted.

When we think about human dignity, we think, "Oh, we're created in the image of God." But human dignity is also signaled by our status as children of God. God offered God's self to us, as parent and creator, and that's something

that can't be taken away. It becomes the basis of human respect: "I'm a child of God, and for that reason I have worth and dignity, and that dignity should be

when he began his papacy with, "Pray for me." He's reiterated time and time again that he makes mistakes. He is willing to be challenged and own up

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respected." And it also plays into the ways in which God calls us together in order to support everyone, especially the least among us.

I have tried to think of the family as a site of care and concern for those who are suffering and struggling.

Does the church adequately respond to real-life families?

Many times, the church doesn't know how to respond to people who don't fit the relationship model we've elevated as the ideal—a married couple with children, etc. It's been harder for me and my husband to plug into the community because he is Protestant and I am Catholic, and we don't yet have kids.

I hear a similar thing all the time from folks who are single, and I definitely experienced that as well—the challenges of finding a sense of belonging at one of the most difficult times in your life. I have to admit, I felt really lost at that point, like I had fallen through the cracks of the church.

If we're thinking about church as this big extended family, do people need to be having kids in order to be a part of this family? Do we need our family members to be trying to get married? Do we have space, either sacramentally or vocationally, for the single life?

There's a need for pastoral sensitivity around these issues of marriage and children and family. Pope Francis earned a lot of leeway, in my mind,

when he hasn't spoken as precisely as he needed to.

The first step for our pastors is that posture of humility in theological consultation, whether it's by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) or the Vatican or what have you. They need the ability to say, "You know what? Maybe what we're saying here is incomplete in terms of family dynamics. Maybe we're failing to enact this vision of equality within the domestic church."

A part of this concern about how this teaching is being put together could be addressed by consulting with more women in the process of putting together documents on these issues. Attending to the experiences of women is so important, but so is paying attention to theological reflection by women.

When we start listening to these other voices, it invites us to consider how we're related to these people. How do our actions affect others? The metaphor of family, again, can broaden what it means to belong so that we can say, "I owe something to this person."

Each one of us has personal integrity. We are personally and individually created in God's image and thus worthy of respect, dignity, love, and care. We use the metaphor of family to model the relationships we should have, but also as a way to think through the ethics of being in family situations that are less than perfect. **USC**

What resources does Latino/a culture have for understanding family?



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A Latino/a family teaches young people the importance of extended family. One's own identity has something to do with people who aren't your mom and dad or brothers and sisters; it involves people outside your own household.

Even the smallest acts can invite a moment of encounter with God. In my family when I was younger, we were obsessed with blessing each other. We really loved showing others that we loved them—even if we didn't particularly like them that day—by blessing their forehead. It was a small gesture of the presence of God in our home and within each one of us. That's very powerful.

There's also the idea of the home as a site of church. Protestant and evangelical communities have done a lot of work that the Catholic Church could afford to look into as well. Is there a way to bring church home, either sacramentally or in terms of cultivating smaller communities?

Church is going to someone else's house and realizing that it's really your house. Let's say you really love Marty Haugen's music—the post-Vatican II aesthetic—and that's really home to you. Maybe it's worth your time to go to a parish that has music in Spanish, be outside of your comfort zone, not really know the language, and realize how, in that moment, the aesthetic power of the Eucharist brings us together across those differences.

Or maybe you attend a church with a more traditional form and realize that there, too, is the Eucharist truly present. Even though it doesn't always resonate with what's most important to you, this is church.

—Nichole Flores