

Reflections

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The Bedrock of Society

The family, established by marriage for the good of its members and the begetting and raising of children, forms the basic societal unit, the foundational element with which society is built. It is through associations of families that larger societal entities are formed -- neighborhoods, towns, cities, states, nations. Pope John Paul II underscored the importance of the family to the country when he addressed the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, stating: "No nation on earth, no political system can think of its own future otherwise than through the image of these new generations that will receive from their parents the manifold heritage of values, duties and aspirations of the nation to which they belong."

It is the family that gives birth to the country's citizens, and it is the family that is the first and foremost entity for educating children, forming their characters, teaching them to know and love God, and for helping them to develop and practice values such as responsibility, respect, discipline, restraint, loyalty and cooperation that are essential to their personal development and future life in society. The Second Vatican Council declared that the parents "role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it."

A healthy society requires enduring families, established by marriage and headed by a mother and father. Pope Benedict XVI has stated that "the sacred institution of marriage is vital to the well-being of every nation. It is the indispensable foundation of family life and the primary source of cohesion within communities...any hope for renewal of society which does not adhere to God's plan for matrimony and the family is destined to founder." Throughout history and across cultures, civilizations have flourished only when they have built their human relationships on the bedrock of marriage and stable families -- a truth that is being ignored today.

Marriage and the family in America -- and in Europe -- are threatened by an emphasis on materialism and self-gratification, a replacement of God in daily life with an ideology of secularism, and the creation of laws and government programs that show preference for alternatives to traditional family arrangements. At the root of these trends is a misguided idea of freedom, conceived not as what one ought to do to fulfill God's plan, but as a license to pursue one's selfish desires. Ironically, prosperity and scientific advances, which should provide the leisure and security from want to allow more emphasis to be placed on eschatological ends have become ends in themselves. Self-gratification, whether it is sought through wealth, power, prestige or pleasure, is replacing the self-sacrifice that is needed in marriage and in raising a family. In the pursuit of material gain, the obligations of family life are viewed as obstacles, and children as burdens rather than blessings.

Easy access to divorce, cohabitation, gender ideologies, same-sex unions, contraception, sterilization, abortion, and other social aberrations are undermining the family and the future well-being of the nation. Today, half of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce; the rate rises to 60% for remarriages. Over the past quarter century, the proportion of children in the United States being raised in two-parent homes has declined from 76% in 1981 to 67% today

-- while the proportion of children living in single-parent homes has risen by almost two-thirds. When the third millennium began, 64% of all black children, 36% of Hispanic children, and 14% of white, non-Hispanic children in America lived in single parent homes.

The resulting effects are ominous and indicate a nation in moral and cultural decline. Research has shown that 63% of youth suicides, 90% of runaway children, 85% of children with behavior problems, 71% of high school dropouts, 85% of youths in prison, and over 50% of teenage mothers are associated with fatherless homes. With its significant influence on child development, the family has an irreplaceable role in the well-being of society.

As Catholics and members of the Knights of Columbus, we can do our part by assuring that our families are stable, vigorous and God-centered. We can lead our children and grandchildren in family prayer, teach them the elements of the Faith, provide a continuing Catholic education for them, make religious events, such as Baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations, into celebratory affairs, show them by example what marriage and family life should be, and let them know that they are loved. As parents and grandparents, we, in turn, will be richly blessed.



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Published July 2007