

Moral Issues and Faith Formation

Rebuilding God's Kingdom on Earth

Can there be any doubt in any mind that the biggest moral problem facing the Catholic Church today – indeed the entire world – is the breakdown of the family unit? No matter whether the family suffers from an absentee father or an overburdened working mother, the evils in society today can be traced to the lack of strong guidance and support of a family founded on faith in a loving God. Many, perhaps most, of our social ills are the products of several generations of dysfunctional or non-existent family units and, without radical remedial action, the horrors are bound to worsen as the number of broken families multiplies.

Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D. is the founder of The Heritage Foundation which was created in 1973 to study, among other things, trends in modern society and government and to analyze those trends in terms of traditional family values. He wrote, in 1995, that,

A review of the empirical evidence in the professional literature of the social sciences gives policymakers an insight into the root causes of crime. Consider, for instance:

- Over the past thirty years, the rise in violent crime parallels the rise in families abandoned by fathers.
- High-crime neighborhoods are characterized by high concentrations of families abandoned by fathers.
- State-by-state analysis by Heritage scholars indicates that a 10 percent increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent homes leads typically to a 17 percent increase in juvenile crime.¹

Further, Dr. Fagan asserts the following:

- Neighborhoods with a high degree of religious practice are not high-crime neighborhoods.
- Even in high-crime inner-city neighborhoods, well over 90 percent of children from safe, stable homes do not become delinquents. By contrast only 10 percent of children from unsafe, unstable homes in these neighborhoods avoid crime.

¹ Fagan, Patrick F., "The Real Root Causes of Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community", March, 1995 (available at <http://www.heritage.org>)

- Criminals capable of sustaining marriage gradually move away from a life of crime after they get married.
- The mother's strong affectionate attachment to her child is the child's best buffer against a life of crime.
- The father's authority and involvement in raising his children are also a great buffer against a life of crime.²

It is not only criminal activity that is promoted by weak family relationships but also many “legal” abominations such as abortion, gay marriage, fetal tissue research, capital punishment, recreational sex, and ill-treatment of workers by bad employment practices. There are, literally, hundreds of thousands of scholarly and well-researched works pointing to the case of the broken family and the family that does not impart Christian morals and their effect upon present and future generations. This statement begs the question then, “If we understand it so well, why are we still only talking about it and not doing something about it?” Movements such as the Catholic Men’s Conference, Promise Keepers, Marriage Encounter, and Dr. James Dobson’s work with Focus on the Family are all outstanding weapons in the war against deterioration of families and we must do all we can to support them and efforts like them. Therefore, the answer is, of course, that some action is taking place but, sadly, it is simply not enough.

The best action we can take as Catholic Christians in the United States is to redouble our efforts of catechesis, both for the young and for adults. We must strengthen our resolve to teach our brothers and sisters about the value of the family unit. Pope Benedict XVI said,

In the Gospel we do not find discourses on the family but an *event* which is worth more than any words: God *wanted to be born and to grow up in a human family*. In this way he consecrated the family as the first and ordinary means of his encounter with humanity.

In his life spent at Nazareth, Jesus honoured the Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph, remaining under their authority throughout the period of his childhood and his

² Fagan, *ibid.*

adolescence (cf. Lk 2: 41-52). In this way he shed light on the primary value of the family in the education of the person.³

God knows the issues and has shown us how to fix them. Can we do less than promulgate His teachings?

Pope Benedict XVI, on another occasion, eloquently extolled the virtues of solid families and their contributions to world peace:

The natural family, as an intimate communion of life and love, based on marriage between a man and a woman, constitutes "the *primary place of 'humanization'* for the person and society", and a "*cradle of life and love*". The family is therefore rightly defined as the first natural society, "*a divine institution that stands at the foundation of life of the human person as the prototype of every social order*".⁴

Again, we see a close bind to holiness. Families are sacred, holy gifts from God Himself and to dishonor them is to blaspheme. To honor and strengthen families, we must teach the Gospel values to God's people in ways that emphasize love, commitment, and covenant, emphasizing the lessons of St. Joseph and, of course, Mary the Mother of God. Teachings, designed to enhance respect for self and others, should focus on the positive aspects of God's love for us and not so much on the rules and prohibitions stated in the complicated language of the Catechism. We have the wonderful messages of the Incarnation and The Holy Family, which are meant for all people everywhere and need to be shared especially with the lonely and marginalized who are in greatest danger of failing their familial responsibilities. The Holy Family is our model and Mary is our maternal teacher:

Against all human expectation God chooses those who were considered powerless and weak to show forth his faithfulness to his promises: Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Deborah; Ruth; Judith and Esther; and many other women. Mary "stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently hope for and receive salvation from him."⁵

³ Pope Benedict XVI, "Angelus", December 31, 2006, St. Peter's Square

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Day of Peace," January 1, 2008

⁵ United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC., 1997 and 2000), n. 489.

It will not be easy to re-task our catechetical mission. Furthermore, given other major problems facing the Church, it may be a renewed mission for the laity, which ought to be decreed with extreme urgency. Jesuit Father Thomas Reese, as editor of *America*, wrote often about the problems as he saw them:

At the top of the list is the shortage of priests.... A church without sacraments is not Catholic. The next pope must acknowledge that providing the Eucharist and other sacraments to the Catholic community is more important than mandatory celibacy.... Ultimately, the church must find ways to make the Gospel understandable and relevant to people of the 21st century. It can no longer simply repeat formulas from previous centuries. To develop new ways to communicate the Gospel message, theologians and pastors must be given freedom to experiment, even though mistakes will be made.^{6 7}

These “new ways” to instruct about the love of God and the increase in ordained clergy will certainly help but, in the end, and especially in the short term, each of us must do our part and we must do it in concert with our brethren in the greater Christian community. We must teach, not only in formal classroom venues, but, also, by our example, our witness, our attitudes, and our behavior. We must always act our belief – “Walk the Talk.”

There is a warm illustrative story that helps describe the role of each baptized Christian in the lifting up of all people of the world:

[A poet saw a young man on the beach] reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean.
As he got closer he called out, "Good morning! ... Why are you throwing Starfish into the ocean?"
"The sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them in they'll die."
"But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and Starfish all along it, you can't possibly make a difference!"
The young man listened politely, then bent down, picked up another Starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. "It made a difference for that one."⁸

⁶ Reese, Thomas J., S.J., “Challenges for the New Pope”, *America*, 192(14) April 3, 2005, p. 3

⁷ (One month after this article appeared, Fr. Reese was forced to resign from the editorship of *America*. He had long been a critic of what he seemed to think was the Vatican’s disconnect from real life. His repeated request to discuss married and female priests only inflamed his superiors.)

⁸ Baker, Joel Arthur, *The Star Thrower* (New York, Random House, 1978)

We watch slick commercials on television and we run to “rescue” pet dogs and cats. Our heartstrings are tugged and we sponsor children in foreign lands. We pledge billions of dollars to help stop cancer and other diseases. All of these are necessary and worthy causes but where is the advocate for people, especially children, who need to be rescued from the depths of pain caused by cold or non-existent families?

The healing of families and the encouragement of new, healthy families must begin on every street corner, in every home, in every church, and must be felt in every heart – impossible you say? Difficult as it may be, it is not impossible. Like a chain reaction, we must duplicate and re-duplicate the efforts of the Star Thrower and, as he rescued starfish, we must be Star Throwers rescuing families.