Rome's Catholic Family
Category : March 1996
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1996

Rome's Catholic Family

The Healthy or Pathological State of Homesteads Is of Global Concern

By Father Pedro Richards, C.P.

There is a Spanish saying that runs like this: "All depends on the lens through which you are peering." And so it is. Other papers of this volume will look at homesteads with glasses of different colors: Jewish, Islamic, Protestant. Herewith are some reflections on the family in a society undergoing a very rapid evolution. Space will not allow many other concepts and details beyond the ones proffered here. May what we offer whet the readers' appetite for further information.

What is the Essence of Family Life for a Catholic?

God being "'family' (a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and having made Man 'to His image and likeness,'" l it follows that "family" forms part of the nature of the Rational Being, Man.

The Creator established that family would have three characteristics: 1) monogamy--one man and one woman; 2) indissolubility--spouses become "one flesh;"2 3) for mutual development.3

But He, likewise, determined a threefold finality: 1) psychological and spiritual evolution of the spouses, 2) due transmission of human life, 3) a rational control of earthly goods for the family's welfare.4

Furthermore, when Christ, the Messiah, became incarnate, He took the "natural" family institution (which He, as God, had created) and transformed it into an image of His Union with His Bride, the Church.5 Thus, for those baptized (hence, followers of Christ), marriage and the family became a sacrament. This super-naturalization brought with it a triple consequence. Marriage and family acquired the following connotation: 1) unity of two spouses into an ontological unity, 2) indissolubility as Christ with His Church, 3) sacredness because of its mysticism.

Down the centuries, the Catholic Church has defended these aims and properties at a great cost both in dissension of unorthodox groups and personal testimony by martyrdom.

These values are transferred through acceptance of the parties wishing to marry sacramentally, making the union null if unwittingly or secretly differing from Catholic teaching. This has brought about a determined culture, distinguishing it from other Christian believers. Previous preparation for marriage assures that these are the rules of the game. The example of home life is expected to inure Catholics to this philosophy. School reinforces these ends and characteristics through the orthodox exposition of such a biblical outlook on marriage and family.

Family Rights

In order to assure the family's task of transmitting life and moulding it for the timely entrance of its members into society, the Catholic Church (through the teaching of its Head, Pope John Paul II in "Familiaris consortio" No. 46) posits the following and fundamental rights of the family.

1. The right to exist and progress as a family. Hence, to found a home and have the necessary means to support it.
2. The right to exercise its responsibility regarding the transmission of life and to educate its children.
3. The right to the intimacy of conjugal and family life.
4. The right to the stability of the bond and of the institution of marriage.
5. The right to bring up the children in accordance with the family's own traditions and religious and cultural values, with the necessary instruments, means and institutions.
6. The right, especially of the poor and the sick, to obtain physical, social, political and economic security.
7. The right to housing suitable for living family life in a proper way.
8. The right to expression and to representation, either directly or through associations before the economic, social and cultural public authorities and lower authorities.
9. The right to form associations with other families and institutions in order to fulfill the family's role suitably and expeditiously.
10. The right to protect minors by adequate institutions and legislation from harmful drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.
11. The right of the elderly to a worthy life and a worthy death.
12. The right to emigrate as a family in search of a better life.

Main Problems as Seen Through Catholic Eyes

The rapid change which characterizes our epoch has affected the family very deeply. This has brought about a sense of confusion and a sense of loss as to where the family is going contemporaneously. Heads of homes are bewildered as to the role and nature of homes. Their roles are blurred. Forces superior to society's basic call put barriers in the fulfillment of aims and obligations of the married. Family issues a poignant S.O.S. to all those seeking a better world in the coming century.

The Vatican II Document, The Church in the Modern World, affirms: "Profound and rapid changes are spreading around the world.... These changes recoil upon man... upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people.6 Judeo-Christian families thus face special problems in keeping alive their traditional beliefs and ideas, which they would like to pass on to their offspring. In the 1970 White House Conference on Children, it was acknowledged: "Parents find themselves at the mercy of a society which imposes pressures and priorities that allow neither time nor place for meaningful activities and relations between children and adults, which downgrade the role of parents and the functions of parenthood, and which prevent the parents from doing things they want to do as guides, friends and companions." 7

Clues to an Increasing Family Self-Reliance

The healthy or pathological state of homesteads is a matter of global concern. No human being can prescind from the family. He springs from a home, is profoundly influenced by it, and it sustains him in the vicissitudes of daily life.

Both children and women are deeply affected both by the positive and negative way in which the family carries out its unfolding.

Millions of babes, children and adolescents today are left to themselves. "Street gangs" are the outcome of boys and girls left to themselves. Women become "sex objects," giving rise to a just recovery of their status in society. The abandonment of the aged and the sick completes the picture of the vulnerable members of homes.

Face to face with the incapacity of parents to deal with the manifold problems appearing in family life, both the Church and other institutions (private and governmental) help the Catholic Church through its varied and diffused network of religious orders, and have profferred assistance to orphans, children's education, asylums and the recuperation of prostitutes. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a living example of this humanitarian work.

However, in the wake of making the family self-reliant, three principles of sociological content guide Catholics in their role of assisting cooperation: 1) what the family can do on its own, teach it to do it; 2) what it cannot do but partly, let it be proportionately assisted; 3) what it cannot do in any way, services should be at hand.

Building the Smallest Democracy

Given, on the one hand, that there is a plan on God's side and, on the other, that man has always found a solution to his

problems (whether on his own or duly bolstered), it becomes imperative to awaken a deeper and more effective interest in the managing of society's fundamental call, the family.

In the document which gathered the opinions of Catholic Bishops with regard to the family it was pointed out that it behooves this smallest democracy to contribute to the dynamization of society at large by:

1. formation of a community of persons within the familial structure, not just being content with a mere cohabitation of human beings therein;
2. being at the service of life through both fecundity and the education of their offspring;
3. participation in the development of community life. The family, through inter-communion of its members and participation, both inside and outside their homestead, must contribute to a betterment of the social, political and international welfare.8

Father Pedro Richards, C.P., born in Argentina, is a member of the Congregation of the Passion, studied at Louvain and in Scotland, and holds an M.A. in Family Sciences from the University of Ottawa. He is Consultor of the Pontifical Commission of the Family in Rome; Director of the Institute for Family Science in Montevideo, Uruguay; and Director of the Digesto Familiar for Priests and Laity dedicated to Family Pastoral.

Notes: 1. Genesis 1.26; 2. Ibid, 2.24; 3. Ibid, 1.28; 4. Cfr. Genesis 1.28; 5. Ephesians 5.32; 6. Second Vatican Council, Acta Apostoliceae Sevis, The Church in the Modern World,

Gaudium et Spes, #4; 7. White House Conference Report on Children, 1970; 8. Cfr. John Paul II, Acta Aposolicae Sevis, Familiaris consortio, 1981, 18-74.

Selected Bibliography: Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version,1966; Second Vatican Council. Acta Apostolicae Sevis: The Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes; John Paul II. Acta Apostolicae Sevis: Familiaris consorio, 1981; White House Conference Report on Children, 1970; Paul IV. Acta Apostolicae Sevis, Encyclical: Humanae vitae, 1968.