

Children: the Supreme Gift of Marriage

Dysfunctionality

To Children

The sociologists and psychologists who are addressing this distinguished assembly will have laid out the dimensions of the sociological and psychological dysfunctionality of the family; which includes, for example, the incidence of divorce, the amount of sexual and psychological abuse, the alienation and isolation of children, the easy slide that such alienation and isolation facilitates into drug abuse, sexual license and other modern forms of escapism.

What I wish to explore here is how the modern age has a philosophical and theological dysfunctionality in respect to its understanding of children and their intrinsic importance, and of the importance of children to their parents and society. At the risk of sounding unduly alarmist, I must observe that our society has nearly reached a state of philosophical insanity in respect to the value of human life, the value of babies and the meaning of sexuality. A state of philosophical insanity means that we are fundamentally and basically denying the reality of fundamental and basic truths to the point that our behavior is dangerously self-destructive.

Babies are gifts, wonderful gifts from God that should rightly be the focal point of any marriage. But in our society babies are rarely considered as gifts from God. Certainly parents still naturally want to have children (if only a few well-planned and genetically well-designed ones) and they still delight in their children but even so children are more often considered a possession that couples -- or single individuals, homosexual or heterosexual -- may opt to have or even opt to have made for them; they are an option, not the reason for marriage. It is even considered a luxury and often an irresponsible luxury for couples to have more than two children; those who have many are considered ignorant or self-indulgent. They are not understood to be doing a generous service for God and man; they are adding to the problem of overpopulation; they are producing enemies of the environment who will consume too many of the world's resources. Any mother of three or more children has horror stories to tell of the rude comments about her child-bearing practices, made to her by perfect strangers. Many of those who are infertile, on the other hand, think they have a right to a baby and think that there are no

ethical limits to the reproductive technologies.

A further irony is that the epidemic in infertility that we seem to be facing has its cause in great part in scarring created by pelvic inflammatory diseases, largely contracted through sex outside of marriage and in reduced fertility attributable to prolonged use of contraceptives. So we have women who for years suppress their fertility so they can have sexual intercourse without babies and who then spend considerable private and public fortunes so they can have babies without sexual intercourse.

The ready availability of abortion speaks volumes of our devaluing of human life and children as do the new industries we have that specialize in baby making, that allow any woman who has money to pay for it to be artificially inseminated and that allow parents literally to design what kind of children they are going to have. Recently, a sixty-two year old woman had a baby with the egg from another woman. We long ago passed through the door of absurdity in these matters and now are just multiplying absurdities.

I apologize if I use the word "absurdity" too liberally, but we are living in a time when the shocking and unthinkable has become ordinary; our instincts that should by virtue of a gut reaction, so ~~to speak, cry out that "such things" ought not be done~~ have been dulled by the proliferation of abuses to human life of this century. At least in the early and middle decades of this century, such absurdity was inflicted on the born; the perpetrators of great crimes against humanity tried to hide these crimes, but at least victims and potential victims could to some extent fight for themselves and their neighbors could be moved to fight for them. The invisibility of the unborn, the seeming insignificance of the fertilized egg, makes it much harder to protect the unborn from the great indignities and vile crimes we wreck upon them.

To Parents

Another great harm done to children is intimately related to the harm done to parents -- babies are generally received into the world by parents who are not mature themselves and who, sadly, have been formed by the values of their dysfunctional society. They have too little sense of the value of life and a great deal of this lack of value comes from the severe misunderstanding of the meaning of sexuality in our culture. Whereas in other decades of this century, it was political utopianism that led to the hostility to life which resulted in massive killings of the innocent, in our age, it has been an

attempt to establish a sexual utopia that has led to the massive killings of the unborn and the great devaluing of the lives of their living brothers and sisters.

In the final decades of this blood-soaked twentieth century, it has not been the teachings of a man such as Marx or the political machinations of a Hitler that has led us to wage what at times seems to be a systematic pogrom on the unborn. Rather, it has been the proliferation of sexual activity that has no ordination to the care of the babies that may issue from that sexual activity.

The devaluing of human life and the devaluing of children we have seen in these last several decades has been paralleled by a devaluing of the meaning of human sexuality. When contraceptives became widely available we had the igniting of the sexual revolution which separated having babies from having sex. When that separation happened, babies were no longer welcomed as the natural and right outcome of sexual intercourse, but were considered an accident of sexual intercourse, an inconvenient burden, so inconvenient that we argue that we need abortion to keep our lifestyles going. Indeed, one of the most telling items of evidence that our society has gone haywire in its understanding of sexuality and the value of life is a statement from the Supreme Court decision about the Casey vs. Planned Parenthood case. There it made the connection between contraception and abortion in a blatant fashion. It stated "in some critical respects abortion is of the same character as the decision to use contraception for two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail." What this passage is saying is that because of the lifestyles that contraception has made possible, abortion is a necessity in our society. In even more blunt speech, what this passage is saying is abortion is necessary because contraception has enabled individuals to engage in sexual relationships that are not in the least receptive to children.

Moreover, the notion that children are an optional offshoot of sex and not the reason for sex or marriage leads individuals to make bad choices for marriage partners. Those who marry, are often simply marrying a sexual partner that they have become used to. Sexual attraction and sexual compatibility become the chief foundation for relationships. Often when I suggest to young people that the primary question they should ask themselves when they are looking for a spouse is "Would this

individual be a good parent to our children?" they are astonished by the question and realize that it would radically influence their choice of a spouse -- and they admit that such a consideration has been far from their minds!

Most couples who get married have lived together before marriage and have contracepted. Their contraceptive practices have shaped their view of the purpose of sexuality and this carries over into marriage. The contraceptive view of sexual intercourse conveys that sex is for pleasure and that children are an option and largely an unwelcome option. This view of sex is, of course, completely contrary to the Catholic understanding of sex. In the Catholic understanding, sexual intercourse is a great gift of God to spouses wherein he enables them to share in his great mission of bringing new souls into existence to share eternal bliss with him (I shall say more about this in a moment). It is meant to be engaged in only by those who are prepared to be parents. Not only is this view of sex completely foreign to our culture but it is also foreign to most Catholic couples who have also jumped on the contraceptive bandwagon.

The erroneous view of the purpose of sexuality flows over into an erroneous view of the purpose of life. If sex can be used strictly for the satisfaction of our own pleasures, then it seems like life itself is meant to be lived in the pursuit of satisfying our desires -- not in the pursuit of serving God. Those who have been sexually active since their teen years enter marriage as quite selfish individuals in regard to sexual intercourse. They have not learned self-restraint in respect to their sexuality nor likely in respect to the indulgence of other desires as well.

Most of these young people who have lived a life of indulgence before they got married have also been parented by parents who lived a contraceptive life-style. My generation has been dreadfully self-indulgent in sexual matters and otherwise but many of us at least had the example of generous and selfless parents that lurked in our memories. The present generation has been parented for the most part by my selfish and self-indulgent generation and have few examples of lives lived in service of raising good children. Their parents, my generation, have largely put careers, the acquisition of material goods and self-fulfillment at the center of their lives -- children fit in as one more life-enriching experience but not as the very reason for the vocation to marriage. When I suggest to young women that instead of pursuing careers they should consider devoting themselves to being a wife and mother

full time, they don't much know what I am talking about since many have known no women who have done such!

Young adults of today purchase at great volume books on parenting; that they need books suggests that few of them enter marriage with much of a notion of how to be a parent. Many of my friends are astonished at how well I do with children and how much I know about children since I am a single woman without children. But my mother had two babies when I was a young teenager and I started parenting from that day forth. Few people these days have the wonderful advantages of growing up in a big family; one of them being the advantage of practicing parenting from a quite early age. Now I have taken to recommending to my friends that when their first child reaches the age of about 12 or thirteen that they have at least one more baby so that their children may enjoy the experience of parenting at that age. I think teenagers who are raised in a house with small children are much more likely to have a responsible view of sexuality since they have a sense of what it means to take care of babies, the consequences of sexuality. Once their youngest brother or sister reaches puberty, they themselves may well be married and having children, so now the cycle can continue as these youngsters can practice parenting on their nieces and nephews!

Children as a gift to spouses from God

The title of this paper "Children as the supreme gift of marriage" is from Gaudium et Spes; this phrase is part of sentence that reads: "Children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute to the greatest extent to the good of the parents themselves." We often think -- and rightly -- that parents give the gift of life to their children and that they are the great benefactors of their children. But it is equally true that children are a gift from God to the parents, a gift that helps them become adults and gives great meaning to their lives.

Babies do tend to make those who care for them more mature. One of my favorite encounters on the face of the earth is meeting a new father. I have had the good fortune of speaking to several of my male friends shortly after they witnessed the birth of their first child. They float about six feet off the ground and make remarks like "Everything is different now." And it is; they will begin to be more responsible in how they spend their money and time; they will begin to care more about the kind of community in which they live, the quality of the school system and government and what is shown in

the media. Those who have responsibilities for the next generation are the ones primarily interested in the kind of world in which we live. They also tend to be concerned about their own virtue or lack thereof since they know they will be models for their own children. Parents will tell you how much they need patience and kindness, courage and hope, for instance, in order to be good parents. If they don't have these naturally, they tend to acquire them through the very process of parenting. Many start going back to Church and start to learn something about their faith (many for the first time) since they wish to pass on good values to their children.

Adults without children need to make a much more conscious effort to be generous and other-directed than do those who have children. Having children in a sense forces selflessness upon one. One has to learn to live for another. Some, of course, successfully resist the formation in virtue that having children can bring, but most people find that they are much better people precisely for having children. They find it quite natural and easy to love someone else more than themselves and to work energetically for someone else who can only give them love in return. God wants us all to be loving, self-sacrificing, and generous. The most natural means he uses for inculcating these virtues in us, is to make us parents. Children also help us acquire supernatural virtues; as I mentioned, many upon becoming parents return to church; they begin to worship and pray in ways that they may have abandoned since their own childhoods. The natural piety and responsiveness of children to the claims of religion can help enforce a wobbly faith of parents. I think parishes could achieve many evangelical goals by having seminars on parenting and teaching the Faith to one's children, for as the children are taught, so too are the parents.

Children as gift to God from spouses

What parents need to learn as they learn their faith is what the vocation to marriage entails. Very few of them understand that marriage is a Christian vocation and is a means of serving God -- marriage in our society seems an altogether selfish institution -- even if mutually selfish. In the modern view, marriage simply ensures one a companion -- for however long one remains married. Few who get married have a sense that what they are doing is embarking upon the adventure of building a family together. In our time, home is not the focus of one's life from which one's energies radiate out to the rest of the world, as it is in the Christian vision; rather home is where one relaxes and unwinds after a

hard day at work -- work, not family, being the center of one's life. One may raise a few children as a kind of hobby, but few think that all one's decisions should revolve around fulfilling one's Christian commitments, which, for a married individual, mean first and foremost being a good spouse and parent.

The first paragraph of Humanae Vitae is in itself a brief catechesis on marriage; it states:

God has entrusted spouses with the extremely important mission of transmitting human life. In fulfilling this mission spouses freely and deliberately render service to God, the Creator. This service has always been a source of great joy, although the joys are, at times, accompanied by not a few difficulties and sufferings.

Spouses should reflect deeply on this notion that God entrusts new life to them and that they are transmitting life that comes from God.

One reason that we so little understand the value of life and of children is that we don't really grasp the Christian message. Again, the current generation by all reports is abysmally religiously illiterate, not often through its own fault. The religious education programs that today's young people endured largely focused on Christianity as a form of social service; few young people have been educated in the meaning of salvation history, in the meaning of the Church and the sacraments, for instance. In my public speaking, when I speak of God the creator who has made the whole universe so that human souls may enjoy eternal bliss with him and that the chief goal of all of us is to bring ourselves and others to salvation, this is often greeted as a message never or rarely heard.

In our day when some animals have more rights than some humans, people are hard pressed to understand what it means to have an immortal soul and what a grand privilege it is to be able to participate in the bringing forth of new human souls. Contraception is so thinkable and doable because couples do not realize what a great affront it is against children as a gift from God. Those who engage in contracepted sexual intercourse are engaging in an act that God designed as a means of conferring a great gift on them; indeed, one thinks he made it so pleasurable so that they would engage in it often, thereby increasing the number of gifts they are likely to receive. Contraception is an emphatic rejection of the gift while at the same time a selfish embrace of the pleasure that comes with the act.

Many have trouble distinguishing natural family planning from contraception and I haven't the time to go into the differences here, but let me note that those who use NFP do not reject and attempt

to negate the baby-making power of sexual intercourse; rather they exhibit great reverence for it. They do not engage in sexual intercourse when a baby is a likelihood; it is rude to reject gifts when one arrives at the party where they are being distributed, but it is not rude to say that it would be inconvenient to have a party at certain times when one cannot accept the responsibilities that may come with it! Those using NFP do not reject the gift of children; they simply postpone the reception of the gift. Contraceptors, however, treat the baby-making power of sexual intercourse with contempt by insisting upon engaging in a potentially fertile act while at the same time attempting to make it an infertile act.

The Catholic church teaches that those who are not prepared to be parents should not be having sexual intercourse. Think of what radical changes would come about in our society if more were living by the Church's teaching. The Catholic ethic of sexual responsibility would abrogate many of the most bizarre problems we have in our society. People would be waiting to have sex and children until they married; think of the troubles we would avoid if this came to pass! Think of the reduction in abortions; think of the reduction in the number of babies born out of wedlock; think of the young women free to finish their schooling and free to enter wholesome marriages. Those who wait to have sexual intercourse and babies have they marriages have a phenomenally low divorce rate compared to the rest of the population; those who do not contracept have a virtually nonexistent divorce rate. Think of how many evils we would avoid if we had stable families. It is living by the Catholic sexual ethic that would ensure such a happy situation.

But don't think we will be hailed as prophets and heroes if we preach such an ethic in season and out from the rooftops as we ought. Those many who speak out against abortion and those few who speak out against premarital sex and contraception are perceived by the media and much of our society as being similar to members of the Ku Klux Klan; they are perceived as narrow and repressed people who wish to impose their restrictive values on others. Last year, in an episode of the sit-com "Picket Fences" a Catholic priest, who had quite weakly articulated the Church's opposition to contraception, was warned that because of the world's population problem and the problem with unwanted pregnancies, soon Catholics would not longer be permitted to speak out against abortion and contraception. Pro-lifers are now under threat of great persecution for peaceful protest outside of

abortion clinics, for activity that is constitutionally protected for any other protest group. Objection to abortion and its natural counterpart, contraception, is an incredible threat to the lifestyles of so many in our society. In spite of the fact that President Clinton is now touting the values that Dan Quayle was mocked for promoting, the policies of the current administration and the whole Zeitgeist is against Catholic morality. I suspect the Church is in for some severe persecution and suppression in not too many years time.

Yet in certain ways, it is easy to proclaim Christian truth in our times. We can see clearly what a world from which Christian values are absent, looks like. At home, we find drugs, pornography, divorce, adultery, abortion, child abuse, violence in our schools and streets, to name some of the more manifest evils. Abroad, what is going on in Bosnia alone is enough to make us see what the darkness looks like. We need the light of Christ or we will continue to sink into a deeper darkness which houses more monsters for children than for any one else.

While we can, we must try to make clear why such acts abortion and contraception are so in conflict with a love of nature and of life. Let us always link our teachings to the Church's teaching on the great value of human life, on the reality of this world as a journey to the next, a journey that is best undertaking with generosity and kindness and love of life as our most reliable travel companions.