

## FAMILY LIFE

Since solidarity is about our most basic sense of belonging to society, then we move next to the most basic unit of society to which we all belong in some way: the family. The family occupies a special place in Catholic social teaching; it is the most intimate sphere in which people cooperate and the first place where children learn about themselves, their individual identities, and their vocations within the wider society.

Church documents sometimes refer to the family as the “domestic church” because it is also where young people first encounter God, form their consciences, and learn moral virtues. Elsewhere it is referred to as the “first cell of society”, for no institution can substitute for the important social roles played by families. The responses of justice and charity that are called for in the social encyclicals depend upon decisions made along with our loved ones in the context of family life and on the level of the individual household.

The well-being of the entire society absolutely depends upon healthy families, committed marriages, and responsible parenthood. Family life is where we learn and practice the virtues of love and compassion that allow us to imagine alternatives to the ruthless competition and selfish individualism that we witness all too often in the business world and in our market-based society. Outside of family life, it is rare to witness a spirit of profound self-sacrifice and generous giving to others that does not count the cost to oneself. But within our families, we are not surprised by (and indeed almost expect) repeated acts of forgiveness and self-emptying love on the part of marital partner, parents and their children. In a world of bewildering complexity and rapid, unpredictable change, the stable relationships of family and home life are like a safe port in a fierce storm. Families are the place where the unconditional love of God is reflected in everyday human activities, where we gain a glimpse of the unity and communion that we hope to find in the Kingdom of God.

But we must also be on guard against excessive idealism about family life. Real-life families experience serious challenges and numerous problems, from within (stemming from their members, who are rarely saints) and from outside (stemming from the world beyond the household). To its credit, *Gaudium et Spes*, the 1965 Vatican II document, describes several of these challenges in a frank and eye-opening way. Several pages of this document are devoted to the problems with the compassionate observation that:

...serious disturbances are caused in families by modern economic conditions, by influences at once social and psychological, and by the demands of civil society (no 47).

Many of these problems come from perennial sources of hardship, such as poverty, illness, inattentiveness of family members, materialism, and irresponsibility. Others come from newer pressures, such as overwork, modern rootlessness, the entry of more women into the workforce with resulting scarcity of reliable daycare, and the adjustments associated with divorce and blended families. Indeed, our thinking about family life itself is constantly challenged by the existence of new family patterns that do not conform to our accustomed notions of the nuclear family. Unlike in years past, household form and combine for nontraditional reasons and with new relationships between children

and adults drawn from several generations.

On many of these items, wise public policies, such as social welfare programs, subsidized provision of quality daycare, medical leave, unemployment compensation, and retirement benefits can make a huge contribution to the health of millions of families. Pope John Paul II offers a comprehensive list of constructive government policies toward families in his list of constructive government policies toward families in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. Some nations, particularly in Western Europe, are far ahead of the United States in adopting such family-friendly economic policies. Catholic social teaching suggests that any compassionate society will count the health of family life as among the highest priorities on its policy agenda.