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RED, WHITE, BLUE, AND CATHOLIC

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CHAPTER 2

Family, Marriage, and the Cradle of Life

In the last chapter, we looked at the four permanent principles of Catholic social teaching: dignity of the human person, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good. Together, these principles give us the framework for the Church's vision of the right ordering of society, but they won't make a bit of difference unless they're made concrete in the lives of those who profess to live by them.

Primarily, this is the work of the laity. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) puts it this way: "The effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others."

The world desperately needs what the Church has to propose—the Good News—and the role of Catholics everywhere is to ensure that that proposal is being made. In this, the commitment and resolve of lay men and women is indispensable.

The Church insists that it has no technical solutions to offer to particular economic and political challenges. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, "It is not the role of the Pastors of the Church to intervene directly in the political

structuring and organization of social life. This task is part of the vocation of the lay faithful, acting on their own initiative with their fellow citizens” (CCC 2442). The first and most important place where the vocation of the lay faithful plays out is the family. Family is often taken to be a private sphere, separate from politics and public life. To some extent, this is true. Family is a sacred space, in which new citizens are made and formed. At its best, it is a place of security and safety. Family is the womb of all society. And because of this, family is of the utmost importance for the well-being of our country. It is the first and most fundamental arena in which our work as disciples and citizens is accomplished.

The Family Makes the Citizen

Nowhere is there a more powerful source of love and devotion than in the family. The bonds of affection that exist between spouses, and between parents and their children, are a source of life’s greatest happiness. The family is the basic cell of all society and the first school of both citizenship and discipleship. Strong families are society’s greatest guarantee of stability and continued flourishing, even in times of crisis.

At the same time, the breakdown of familial bonds is among the most heartrending of human tragedies and destructive to healthy society. As Pope John Paul II put it, “As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.”² This is not simply a pious slogan. The importance of family cannot be overstated.

If the family is the foundation of society and of civilization itself, then the signs of our times are troubling. The foundation is cracking. Without stable families, society is like a house built on sand. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “The well-being of the individual person and of

human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family” (*Gaudium et Spes*). The crisis of the family is not just a crisis for individuals. Insofar as all societies depend on the family for the formation and education of children, of new citizens, the crisis of the family affects the whole of society now and far into the future.

None of us chooses our families. We are born into a community of persons, all sinners, but hopefully loving, upright, and understanding. Family is the one place where we cannot avoid the inescapable limits of our own will and consent. When we come to see other people not as persons in their own right but as means toward our own end or as problems to be solved, we lose sight of their humanity. And we risk losing sight of our own. The realities of family life inoculate us against this. In the family, we have no choice but to take other persons as they are for better or worse. Our parents are ours, and we depend on them and (eventually) they depend on us. Our siblings are ours, and we depend on them and they depend on us for better or worse. In the family, we learn to live with others not only when it’s easy but also when it’s hard. We learn the difficult lesson that our relationships with other people are not reducible to our own wants and needs. We learn the limits of our own willfulness. We learn that some relationships—the deepest, strongest, most important relationships—are not built on our consent but on love. We learn the importance of vulnerability and of tenderness toward those who are vulnerable before us.

Every family has its own story. None is a mere statistic. We cannot reduce the moral and vocational drama that plays out in each of our own lives and families to a series of generalizations and statistics. That said, we also have to be aware of the trends in modern marriage and family life.

Family stability goes hand in hand with marital stability, and on this front, the news is not encouraging. Rates of marriage in the United States have fallen as more young people are choosing to cohabitate rather than marry. Marriage is increasingly seen as the culmination of a sexual relationship rather than its starting point. Extensive research by W. Bradford Wilcox, who directs the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, shows marriage collapsing most dramatically among those who never finish high school (for whom births out of wedlock are highest), while those who finish college are the least likely to have a child outside of marriage.

Stable marriages are closely linked to economic prospects for children. Marriage, it turns out, is just about the most effective poverty deterrent we know of and yet it's being abandoned most rapidly by those who are already at an economic disadvantage. Forty percent of children born in the United States today are born to unmarried parents. For mothers younger than age thirty, the percentage spikes to over 50 percent. As *The New York Times* put it in 2012, "It used to be called illegitimacy. Now it is the new normal."⁶

Rates of marriage within the Catholic Church have also plummeted. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate estimates that, while Catholics make up about 25 percent of the U.S. population, only about 7 percent of marriages in the United States take place within the Catholic Church.⁷ The implications of this are grave. Catholic families, like all families, aren't just struggling—they're not even starting.

6 DeParle, Jason, and Sabrina Tavernise. "For Women Under 30, Most Births Occur Outside Marriage." *New York Times*, February 17, 2012.

7 Gray, Mark M, ed. "Divorce (Still) Less Likely Among Catholics," 1964 blog CARA, September 26, 2013.

Although every Catholic in the United States is aware of a decline in the number of men being ordained to the priesthood—the number of priests being ordained every year in the U.S. has dropped 38 percent since 1970—what might be shocking is that the number of Catholic marriages has dropped 64 percent over the same period. As Timothy Cardinal Dolan put it, the *real* vocations crisis in the U.S. is marriage: “We have a vocation crisis to lifelong, life-giving, loving, faithful marriage. If we take care of that one, we’ll have all the priests and nuns we need for the Church.”⁸

Sadly, as the crisis in the family has become more evident, the family itself has become a political football. What was uncontroversial only a few short years ago now sounds to many ears like a politically charged, even partisan statement. The family, founded on the marriage of man and woman, is the most fundamental cell of all human society. How bizarre that family and marriage have become controversial! Human society has always been shaped by two fundamental, indisputable facts about human life: There’s only one way to make new human beings, and new human beings are utterly incapable of caring for themselves and need someone else to care for them. These basic realities remain today, yet the natural institutions that have always guarded these relationships have suddenly become a matter of heated public debate. None of us would exist without a mother and a father, a fact which remains true even when human relationships break down in all the painful ways we know they can. Yet our culture often treats this fact as irrelevant.

If personal experience and the overwhelming cultural evidence doesn’t convince you that the family is in crisis, then

8 “Archbishop Dolan: Marriage Is the ‘Real Vocation Crisis.’” *Catholic World News*, August 13, 2009.

consider that the crisis in the family has reached such global proportions that, for the second time in a generation, an Ordinary General Synod of Bishops met in Rome to address challenges facing the family.

The Family as the Font of Civil Society

Of course, the family is not just a place for the *making* of children; it's where little tyrants (and we all start out as tyrants, adorable little bundles of willfulness) are shaped and formed into responsible men and women. The family is where we are first nourished and fed, where we learn right from wrong, where we learn to put others before ourselves, where we learn self-control, where we first learn to love God and cherish others, and where we learn about just punishment and mercy and forgiveness. Family is where we learn that the strong must defend the weak and that love covers a multitude of sins. Family is where we learn from experience our fundamental obligation to solidarity. If we don't learn these things from our families, where will we learn them? Our families shape and form the men and women we will become more than any other influence.

In this sense, our nation—every nation—is almost entirely dependent on the family for the formation and education of each new generation of citizens. If families are failing, that is, not just struggling but falling apart, then the nation has a deep problem.

Our laws can make life easier for families around the margins. Economic burdens have been a source of strife from time immemorial, which means that virtually everything the government does that affects economic policy, from labor and wage laws, to job training programs, to family tax preferences,

to education policy and school choice, affects the financial stability of families. As Pope Francis reminded us over and over in *Laudato Si'*, “Everything is connected.” But there is little the government can do directly to build strong families. The state doesn’t deal in love and affection. We can’t simply pass a law making men good fathers and faithful husbands. No legislator, by the stroke of his or her pen, can make a troubled family into a place of security, fidelity, and virtue rather than strife and division.

Marriage Makes the Family

The impact of law on marriage culture is mostly indirect, but there are some exceptions. Liberal divorce laws, including no-fault divorce, have been weakening the institution of marriage for decades. The recent redefinition of marriage by the Supreme Court in *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Health, et al.* (No. 14–556) has enshrined in U.S. law an understanding of marriage that is, from the point of view of every civilization in history, deeply inadequate because it deliberately denies the essential connection between marriage and the begetting and rearing of children in order to make room for same-sex couples. But the redefinition of marriage by the Supreme Court is not the cause of the challenges facing the family in the United States. It’s more a symptom of a culture in which marriage is seen as exclusively pertaining to the personal gratification of those entering into marriage. The begetting and rearing of children is becoming seen as, at most, an optional feature of marriage with no connection to the essence of the institution.

This change in how our culture sees marriage is due in large part to the separation of sex and marriage that was fueled

by the sexual revolution and catalyzed by the contraceptive pill. If sex is separated from children, it was only a matter of time before marriage became separated from the idea of family. As the Second Vatican Council put it in *Gaudium et Spes*: “Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.” Separate marriage from the begetting and educating of children, and the welfare of the parents suffers, as does the welfare of society as a whole.

One can have lots of sex and babies without marriage. This, of course, has always been the case, but today it’s becoming the new normal. Marriage is increasingly seen as being about the personal fulfillment of the two people who enter into it. No one seems to deny that marriage is good for the people getting married, but what purpose does marriage have once it is no longer considered the proper setting for sexual intimacy? Why should we see marriage as the proper place for sexual intimacy when that behavior has been uncoupled, so to speak, from any necessary connection to raising kids? As far as U.S. law is concerned, marriage has been reduced to a vehicle for certain tax benefits and visitation rights. By redefining marriage, the Supreme Court has created a society in which a civil union is available to anyone who wants one, but nowhere does the state recognize the union of a man and a woman for the sake of raising the next generation as a privileged and natural institution. All of which poses the question: If marriage is no longer a natural and privileged institution dedicated to raising the next generation, what is it for?

We are in uncharted territory where marriage is concerned. For all the variety in sexual morality and marriage laws throughout human history, no civilization has ever