

FAMILY LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES (1/2)

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INTRODUCTION

Turn on television in the United States and watch carefully some of the hundreds of advertisements which are aired each day. Many of these try to sell products which are intended for family use. The family depicted in these sales messages is most often a small, middle class, caucasian family consisting of a young father and mother with two healthy children, a boy and a girl. In truth, there are millions of such families in the U.S., but there are many others who do not fit this description, and they must be considered in any discussion of the state of marriage and the family in the United States.

It is difficult to give a brief description of family life and marriage in the United States because of the size of the nation and the diversity of groups to be found in the population. Attitudes to marriage and family, the structures and customs of the home, the strength of the religious values of the parents - all of these factors may differ markedly from group to group and from place to place over the vast area of the United States. These groups can be distinguished by race, by religious belief, by economic level, and by geographical location.

Marriage and Family in the United States

Following is a brief summary of demographic statistics for the United States. Again, the diversity in the country must be kept in mind.

The population of the United States is 256,000,000. Of this number, 75% live in urban areas, 25% in rural. One-third live in the southern part of the country, one-fourth live in the middle west or central region, and one-fifth live in the northeast and one-fifth in the west.

One-fourth of the citizens of the U.S. are Catholic, and 55% are Protestant. Four out of five have completed high school (secondary) education; and one out of five has attained four years of higher education.

There are 72 million family units in the country, of which 25% are single-parent households with the vast majority being female parents. Fifty-five per cent of the population live with a spouse; 12 per cent live alone.

Of the 72 million families, 79% (57 million) are white, 11% (7.7 million) are black, 7% (5.2 million) are hispanic, and 2% (1.6 million) are oriental. The average number of children is 2.2 (Catholics have 2.4).

With the average possible length of a marriage being 50 years, today couples spend 18% of their married lives raising children, compared to 50% a century ago. Sixty-six per cent of the population is still married to their first spouse.

The American Catholic Church and the Family

The leadership of the Catholic Church in the United States have always placed a high priority on family life, consistently speaking out on its behalf and decrying the influences which exert a negative influence on it.

During this Year of the Family, the American hierarchy has summarized its longstanding support by its message, "Follow the Way of Love" which appeared in November, 1993. It is intended to be used as the basis for the activities in the dioceses throughout the nation, and is currently serving as a basic resource in parishes.

The Bishops say:

"The family exists at the heart of all societies. It is the first and most basic community to which every person belongs. There is nothing more fundamental to our vitality as a society and as a Church.

"When people talk about life in a family, they speak of love with its abiding peace, its searing pain, its moments of joy and disappointment, its heroic struggle and ordinary routines

"...We are sons and brothers and uncles. We have known the commitment and sacrifices of a mother and father, the warmth of a family's care, the happiness and pain that are part of loving."

This document is the culmination of a succession of publications in recent years, all related to an analysis of social, cultural, and economic factors which impinge on the family. The Bishops have repeatedly reiterated the traditional teaching of the Church on this topic, and have called Americans to rededicate themselves to the high ideals of Christian marriage.

American Catholic Family Values

In their statements, the Bishops have stressed the values which they see as essential to strong family life in the United States. These values include the concept of marriage as a permanent, faithful, lifegiving institution. Sexual pleasure in marriage is seen to bring a couple into deeper union with each other and with God. Children are a gift from God and the fruit of the love of the two spouses. The ideal is a two-parent family, accompanied by other elders who enrich the family. The family is a Church of the Home. Family life is a unique way to experience and share God's love.

Although statistics indicate widespread problems, even a crisis in American family life (including the Catholic families and others who send their children to Lasallian schools), it must be said that there is a vast number of families who are sincerely trying to reach the ideals set out by the Bishops and with real success. Catholic families are encouraged by the strong emphasis on family values to be

found among the members of Protestant evangelistic denominations; they can be found as allies of the Catholic position in matters of social and public policy in the American democratic process.

Challenges to the Family in the United States

The term "family values" was often heard in the 1982 presidential election campaign in the U.S. The personal character of now-President Clinton was called into question, along with the support of his Democratic political party for abortion and its opposition to prayer in schools and to any type of financial aid to parents who wish to send their children to non-government schools. The Catholic Bishops have **publicly protested** the administration support of abortion and its opposition to aid to nonpublic schools parents. Advocacy to permit prayer in public schools is led by Protestant-affiliated groups.

Following is an analysis of what may be considered the principal problems which the citizens of the United States face in their attempt to build and maintain strong families. It is understood that these are not peculiar to the U.S.A., but they are considered by many to be among the most important challenges in our country.

1. Media Influence

The print and electronic media in the United States have a pervasive effect on the thinking and attitudes of the citizens of this region. This affects all levels of society, all races and ethnic groups, all religious groups. Television is the most powerful instrument of shaping the culture of the land, especially by the entertainment and personalities which it features. Research indicates that young Americans spend five hours per day watching TV, with an effect that is greater than their formal schooling.

Television, along with movies and the popular print media, often foster values that are inimical to the values which undergird a strong and committed family structure. The values they espouse are those of materialism, consumerism, narcissism, and emphasis on the pleasure of the individual, immediate gratification or release from pain and discomfort of any kind.

The above-mentioned negative values are of a general nature. There are two specific areas where the effect of the media and TV are especially inimical to the development and maintenance of healthy families in America. They are sexuality and violence.

Illicit sexuality has become frequent and flagrant on American TV. A recent study indicated that 90% of the instances when sexual intercourse is depicted or mentioned on TV, it is between two adults who are not married to each other; when it is referred to in the context of a married couple, it is almost always in a comedy situation. The drive to sexual gratification is a dominant theme on a great many of the popular TV programs, and also in the movies and popular print media. It is also used subtly or blatantly in advertising consumer products of all kinds.

The other destructive theme found in the movies and television is that of violence. Explicit depictions of killing or inflicting bodily harm are commonplace and graphic. Again it is related to the glorification of the individual and the lack of restraint upon undesirable behavior. It is portrayed as an immediate way to resolve conflicts, even the normal way. While violence in family situations is not as frequent as that in other contexts, yet the media would seem to have at least an indirect effect upon its use in family-related activities and conflicts. There are indications that the incidence of violence in American families is increasing. It is acknowledged to be a matter of power and control when used in the family situation. In 1990, 2.5 million cases of child abuse were reported. The suicide rate among 15 to 19 year olds has tripled in less than 20 years.

2. Family Structure

As indicated in all current research, the ideal of a stable, two-parent family is the most favorable environment in which children grow up and acquire their own concept of family strength. Single-parent families now constitute 25% of the family units in the United States. One out of every five babies is now born out of wedlock, the majority of them to teenage mothers. Growing children and adolescents are deprived of the complementary influence of mother and father, female and male. The lack of male role models for a large number of young people today is of great concern; this has a special importance in the African-American community where is a disproportionate number of families headed by a female, with no male partner in the home. Too many young grow up without the influence and example of an adult male parent who shares in the raising of children and takes a responsible role in family affairs.

Economic pressures in American life today, often related to health care, education, and housing have forced many mothers, including those with small children, to work full time at a job outside the home, with the result that children suffer from a lack of supervision. The toll upon the time and energy of the mother prevents her from devoting sufficient time to the education and nurturing of her children.

The divorce rate in the U.S. has increased by 70% since the turn of the century, reaching an all-time high in the 1970's and stabilizing since then. Currently, one of three first marriages ends in divorce. Twenty-five per cent of adult Catholics have been divorced and half of them have remarried. By 1995, the combined total of single-parent and remarried (blended) families will exceed the number of two-parent, never divorced families.

The ever-rising incidence of divorce in American families denotes a lack of commitment to a stable relationship and unrealistic expectations of the marriage relationship. This is related to the negative values spoken of above with regard to the media. The "me first" mentality which is glorified in print and on the screen is not conducive to the continuing effort and patience needed to continue a stable marriage. Again, young people exposed to the example of parents breaking off their marriage will continue to be affected by this memory in their own marriage.

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