

FAMILY LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES (2/2)

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3. Religious Values

Religious values no longer play a dominant role in most American families. Traditional Church teaching concerning the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage has less influence than in past decades. Birth control is a controverted issue in the Church today, and the fall in the birth rate among Catholics, and the general population, indicates its widespread use, for economic reasons as well as those related to self-gratification or convenience.

There is less religious practice in the homes in the United States, where one should expect sound values to be reinforced. This may be due to the growing incidence of marriages involving partners of two different faiths, where conflict is avoided by not including religious observance in the family routines. Currently 17% of adult Catholics are married to non-Catholics. It is also caused by increased secularization.

Abortion takes place both within and outside of marriage. It always represents a gross violation of the law of God, and a disregard for human life which can carry over to interpersonal relationships, and cause convenience and the avoidance of responsibility to determine one's actions. It is estimated that almost 30% of pregnancies in the United States end in abortion.

The elevated, perhaps unrealistic ideals of Christian marriage, do not receive the attention or publicity once given them in the Church. Catholic educational institutions by and large do not see that all of their students are given a comprehensive theological, spiritual, and psychological preparation for marriage, along with practical instruction for daily living the marriage relationship and raising children.

In preparation for this colloquium, the seven colleges and universities sponsored by the Brothers in the United States, along with the Directors of Education for the eight Districts were surveyed to determine the type and extent of preparation for marriage which is available to the students in our fifty-one secondary schools.

From the information received, it appears that instruction on marriage and the family is available in all our institutions. These courses are often compulsory on the secondary level but optional in higher education. Themes related to sound family life are less present such as interpersonal communication skills, conflict resolution, women's issues, and the role of the male. It is estimated that about 67% of Lasallian students are currently members of two-parent families.

4. Other influences

Among other factors in modern American society which have a deleterious effect on family and marriage, the matter of career pressures upon both father and mother can loom large, especially at the present time when jobs are not plentiful and many major industries have been cutting back on their employees. Job-related forced mobility uproots a family from relatives and friends, and lessens the social effect of a broader family support system and influence. Sixteen percent of U.S. residents move to a different residence each year; of these six per cent move outside their immediate region.

The Bishops have also indicated that they are concerned about the difficulties experienced by modern families in maintaining their cultural identity and passing it on to their children to reinforce traditional family values. Parents are caught in the tension of preserving their family and ethnic heritage without hindering their children from coping successfully with the demands of modern life.

Educational and health care expenses cause tension in families. There is the incidence of substance abuse, whether alcohol or drugs, among both parents and children, with tragic consequences for the happiness and strength of the family. Twenty million children live with an alcoholic parent.

The family in the United States is profoundly affected by the changes in gender roles and relationships which are taking place because of the stress upon women's issues and the recognition of the equality of men and women. Some are confused by the changes and the issues which are being raised in public debate.

Poverty is a major family problem. An estimated 5.5 million U.S. children under twelve years of age are hungry; another 6 million are underfed. Twenty-five per cent of pre-school children live in poverty. More than 8 million children are in families without health insurance. Mothers and children make up an increasing proportion of the homeless in our land.

Very many families need two incomes to meet their economic needs; forty per cent of families are two-wage earner units. Half of the mothers with children under the age of one and 70% of mothers with school-age children work at least part time outside the home.

This is a discouraging list of negative forces acting upon U.S. families. It is evidently necessary that the combined forces of Church, school, government, and the business community must come to the aid of the family today.

WHAT CAN LASALLIAN SCHOOLS DO?

1. Instruction

As academic institutions, our schools have the opportunity and the duty to include in the curriculum a solid study of topics in religious studies and social studies which accurately present the factors conducive to a healthy family development. Sound principles of Christian sexuality should be presented. Adapted to the age of the students, these

principles should become more explicit as age advances, but done with great sensitivity to the individual students and their stage of psychological and emotional development, and in concert with the parents of younger pupils.

2. Formation

Because the Lasallian school is more than a purely academic institution, instruction in the area of family life, as in many others, needs to be accompanied by a program of motivation and understanding which will affect attitudes and conduct. Growth in the Christian virtues and spirituality will necessarily help to prepare the students to be good spouses and parents. Whatever will help students to grow in the art and practice of open communication will carry over into family life and be a healthful trait in that context.

Two kinds of witness are available in the Christian school. There is the example of committed religious and clergy who are faithful to their life of vowed dedication. There is also the witness of married faculty and staff, who are serious about living up to the ideals of the marriage state and, the unmarried lay staff can also convey by their words and example, respect for Christian sexual mores while in the single state.

The total religious formation of students will prepare for family life, as they grow in the practice of prayer, use of the sacraments, appreciation of Holy Scripture, fidelity to the practice of Christian morality and a generous giving of self to others. A young person who lives in the presence of God and is attached to the Person of Jesus Christ has the basis on which to build a healthy family.

The Lasallian schools and colleges of the U.S. enroll a total of 68,000 students, of whom 40,000 are in secondary and elementary schools. This, of course, is a small percentage of the total number of children and youth in the country.

A recent study has indicated that over half of the baptized Catholic children and youth in the U.S. between the ages of five and seventeen do not receive formal religious instruction, either in a Catholic school or in a parish-based religious education program. Catholic schools enroll 20% of baptized Catholic youth, religious education programs 30%. In all, 5.5 million young Catholics do not have the opportunity for organized religious and spiritual instruction and formation as described to prepare them for marriage and family life.

In this regard, the size and diversity of the country must be recalled; the number of Catholic children **not** enrolled in formal religious programs ranges from 20 percent in the southeastern United States to 65% in the western and south western states.

3. Family Collaboration and Involvement

The Lasallian school needs a close relationship with the families of its students in order to most fully achieve its overall purposes of instruction and formation. There must be sensitivity to the family situation of each student and ongoing collaboration with the parents. The school cannot be effective if it attempts to carry on its work in isolation from the life contexts from which the students come and in which they spend the majority of their time.

More specifically, the preparation of students for marriage

and family life can best be done with knowledge of the families from which they come. In this way instruction can be adapted to meet the needs of the pupils. Good teachers are always alert to outside factors which impinge upon the particular needs of the individual and their capacity to receive instruction in certain areas.

The Lasallian school should exhibit a total openness to the parents at all times, so that there is encouragement to parents to remain in contact with the educators of their children. This can be encouraged by formal communications and programs. Furthermore, the school should make its personnel and resources available to families to help them deal with the challenges they face and to encourage them to continue their efforts to build a strong family. Formal adult education courses will do this, also the formation of small groups for discussion, sharing, and mutual encouragement.

Recent research in Catholic schools in the United States indicates that they all have parent associations. Elementary school parents are more heavily involved in their schools than those with secondary students. This involvement is even less on the college level. Parents often participate actively as volunteers in and for the school. As compared with public school parents, Catholic school parents are significantly more involved in the school and have more frequent communication with it. Catholic school parents tend to pay closer attention to school progress, monitor home work, and know where their children are and what they are doing.

The American college presidents and the District Directors of Education report that parents are involved in parent associations, as board members, and as volunteers in our secondary schools, but there is almost no involvement of parents on the university level.

4. Other Church Resources

American Catholic families have many resources available to them in addition to those incidental to their being Catholic school parents. As mentioned in "Follow the Way of Love" from the Bishops, groups such as the Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter, Teams of Our Lady, the New Families Movement, in addition to the Family Life Office found in each diocese are actively promoting activities to strengthen marriages and family life. Troubled marriages have resources of pastoral counseling, and specific programs (Retrouvaille, The Third Option) to assist them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to sketch in broad strokes a picture of marriage and the family in the United States. It is a picture which depicts many problems, even areas of crisis. It is an impressionistic picture because the reality of family life in the U.S. is one of considerable diversity, and there is a broad range of difference among different groups and in different areas in all of the characteristics and challenges which have been mentioned.

Along with all of the 59,220,000 Catholics in the country, those engaged in Lasallian educational works, are trying to meet the challenges. Much remains to be done so that the God-given ideals of marriage and the family are ever more realized. •