

The Family in the Social Teaching of the Church

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Prior to Vatican II

For the Catholic Church, the family is the very bedrock of society. Fissures in that bedrock will eventually result in earthquakes in society. It is, in fact, impossible to have a healthy society without healthy families. For families to be healthy, however, the members of the family must understand – and live out - the very meaning of what family is.

Certainly, it would be difficult for a faithful Catholic today to be unaware that the family is a frequent topic of the Holy Father's reflection. We will examine the Holy Father's teaching below, but teaching and reflection on the family did, not surprisingly, precede the pontificate of John Paul II. Indeed, while the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council provided the central teaching on the family, it was during the period prior to the Council that most of the guiding principles were laid out.

Modern Catholic social teaching was born in 1891 in *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of the Working Classes)*. While the role of the Church as teacher on "social issues" was not new (the Church has always and everywhere been, by virtue of its divine commission, teacher of faith and morals), it was in *Rerum Novarum* that it first systematically responded to the problems of the modern era. Indeed, a subsequent pontiff, Pius XI in *Quadregessimo Anno*, called it "the magna carta on which all Christian activities in social matters are ultimately based."

In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII set forth what has come to be recognized as the "social doctrine of the Church." Many principles were enunciated that, as we will see, would be subsequently developed by the teaching magisterium of the Church. For instance, the encyclical insisted on the right to marriage, the existence of the family *prior* to society, the obligation of the state to assist the family, the requirement that such state intervention be limited, the importance of parental authority, the understanding that property ownership was integral to the fulfillment of parental duties, and the dignity of work. For Leo, the family was "the society of the household." In Leo's own words -

"Rights of this kind (i.e., property rights) which reside in individuals are seen to have much greater validity when viewed as fitted into and

connected with the obligations of human beings in family life...No law of man can abolish the natural and primeval right of marriage...Behold, therefore, the family, or rather the society of the household, a very small society, but a true one, and older than any polity! For that reason it must have certain rights and duties of its own entirely independent of the State...Wherefore, assuming, of course, that those limits be observed which are fixed by its immediate purpose, the family assuredly possesses rights, at least equal with those of civil society, in respect to choosing and employing the things necessary for its protection and its just liberty...But if citizens, if families, after becoming participants in common life and society, were to experience injury in a commonwealth instead of help, impairment of their rights instead of protection, society would be something repudiated rather than to be sought after...To desire, therefore, that the civil power should enter arbitrarily into the privacy of the home, is a great and pernicious error. If a family perchance is in such extreme difficulty and is so completely without plans that it is entirely unable to help itself, it is right that the distress be remedied by public aid, for each individual family is a part of the community. Similarly, if anywhere there is a grave violation of mutual rights within the family walls, public authority shall restore to each his right for this is not usurping the rights of citizens, but protecting and confirming them with just and due care. Those in charge of public affairs, however, must stop here: nature does not permit them to go beyond these limits. Paternal authority is such that it can be neither abolished nor absorbed by the State, because it has the same origin in common with that of man's own life." [18-21]

Vatican Ecumenical Council II (1963-65)

Vatican II addressed the family in four important documents – the *Declaration on Christian Education*, the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, and the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

In the *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis)*, Oct 28, 1965), the Council Fathers emphasized the irreplaceable role of parents in the education of children. "As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on

them lies the gravest obligation of educating their family... The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.”

The role of parents is to teach their children “to know and worship God and to love their neighbor”. Such education prepares them for life in society. Indeed, “the family is the principal school of social virtues which are necessary to every society.”

Though “the task of imparting education belongs primarily to the family, it requires the help of society as a whole.” The civil and political authorities “should recognize the duties and responsibilities of parents... and provide them with the requisite assistance. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, when the efforts of the parents and of other organizations are inadequate, it should itself undertake the duty of education, with due consideration, however, for the wishes of the parents.” (3)

Thus, in the *Declaration on Christian Education*, the Church asserted that (a) the parents are the primary educators of children, (b) that such education prepares children to take their place in society and the Church, and (c) that the role of the State is to assist parents in this task.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae, Dec 7, 1965) echoed a theme from the *Declaration on Christian Education*. The parents “have the right to decide in accordance with their own religious beliefs the form of religious upbringing which is to be given to their children. The civil authority must therefore recognize the right of parents to choose with genuine freedom schools or other means of education... Furthermore, the rights of parents are violated if their children are compelled to attend classes which are not in agreement with their religious beliefs of the parent or if there is but a single compulsory system of education from which all religious instruction is excluded.” (DH 5)

When we read *Dignitatis Humanae* along with *Gravissimum Educationis*, it is clear that the Catholic Church teaches that while the primary role of parents as teachers of their children may be – and sometimes must be – augmented by the State, the State may not do so in a way that offends the fundamental religious beliefs of the parents. Education, then, is not a state function; rather it is parental function, which may require state assistance. Whatever form it takes, it must respect and facilitate religious education which is acceptable to the parents. If so, the child will be

properly prepared for society, and society will, so to speak, reap the benefit. The family is, as the Council said, the “school of social virtues.”

The *Degree on the Apostolate of the Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Nov 18, 1965) discusses the apostolate of married persons and of the family. Of course, in essence, these are one and the same. There is no distinction between “married persons” and “the family.” Rather the family (with or without children) is the fruit of marriage. However, since there is no family without marriage, “the married state is the beginning and foundation of human society.” (#11) Families, “along with all the faithful,” are to collaborate with “people of good will” to ensure that civil legislation respects marriage and the family, and to ensure that the peculiar needs of families are respected in social legislation concerning, for example, housing, education, and social security. In addition, the family itself, apart from its role in political society, is to offer “active hospitality and practice justice and other good works for the benefit of all its brothers suffering from want.”

In all these ways, the family serves as “the vital cell of society.” “To attain the ends of their apostolate more easily it can be of advantage for families to organize themselves into groups.”

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Gaudium et Spes, Dec 7, 1965) teaches, “God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning ‘male and female he created them’ (Gen. 1:327). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts.” In a section on “The Dignity of Marriage and the Family,” the Church boldly proclaims that “The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life.” (47) “The family is the place where different generations come together and help one another to grow wiser and harmonize the rights of individuals with other demands of social life: as such it constitutes the basis of society. Everyone, therefore, who exercises an influence in the community and in social groups should devote himself effectively to the welfare of marriage and the family. Civil authority should consider it a sacred duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality and promote domestic prosperity. The rights of parents to procreate and

educate children in the family must be safeguarded. There should also be welfare legislation and provision of various kinds made for the protection and assistance of those who unfortunately have been deprived of the benefits of family life.” (52)

Thus, the *Degree on the Laity* and *Gaudium et Spes* emphasize the fundamental unity of marriage and the family (a link often denied today), show how marriage/family are fundamental to society, and impose on all people of good will the obligation to protect and promote them.

Post-Vatican II

The “key” to the pontificate of John Paul II, if one may speak this way, is, I believe, to understand the Pope as loyal son of the Council. In other words, John Paul II is – and aspires above all to be – the faithful, tireless implementer of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. He has certainly done this with the Council’s teaching on the family.

John Paul II’s teaching on the family has been principally in three documents, *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)* (1981), *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)* (1991), and *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)* (1995).

In *Familiaris Consortio*, at the beginning of his pontificate, the Holy Father addressed an issue dear to his heart, the family. The matter was urgent because “the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it” and because “the well-being of society and [of the Church] are intimately tied to the good of the family.”

The Holy Father proclaimed, “Marriage and the family were willed by God in the very act of creation.” (#3) This is so because it is the “place” where love finds expression, is made manifest, lives. “Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” “The only place in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage... whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God.” (#11) “The family is the first and fundamental school of social living: as a community of love, it finds in self-giving the law that guides it and makes it grow. The self-giving that inspires the love of husband and wife for each other is the model and norm...” (#37) This “experience of communion and sharing that should characterize the family’s daily life represents its first and fundamental contribution to society.” (43)

“The social role of families is called upon to find expression also in the form of political intervention: families should be the first to take steps to see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend, but support and positively defend the rights and duties of the family. Along these lines, families should grow in awareness of being ‘protagonists’ of what is known as ‘family politics’ and assume responsibility for transforming society.” (44)

“Christian families should become actively engaged, at every level, in other non-ecclesial associations as well. Some of these associations work for the preservation, transmission and protection of the wholesome ethical and cultural values of each people, the development of the human person, the medical, juridical and social protection of mothers and young children, the just advancement of women and the struggle against all that is detrimental to their dignity, the increase of mutual solidarity, knowledge of the problems connected with the responsible regulation of fertility in accordance with natural methods that are in conformity with human dignity and the teaching of the Church. Other associations work for the building of a more just and humane world; for the promotion of just laws favoring the right social order with full respect for the dignity and every legitimate freedom of the individual and the family, on both the national and international level; for the collaboration with the school and with the other institutions that complete the education of children, and so forth.” (72)

“The apostolate of the family will also become wider through works of spiritual and material charity towards other families, especially those most in need of help and support; towards the poor, the sick, the old, the handicapped, orphans, widows, spouses that have been abandoned, unmarried mothers and mothers-to-be in difficult situations who have tempted to have recourse to abortion, and so on.” (71)

“The People of God should also make approaches to the public authorities, in order that the latter may resist these tendencies which divide society and are harmful to the dignity, security and welfare of the citizens as individuals, and they must try to ensure that public opinion is not led to undervalue the institutional importance of marriage and the family.... Society and the public authorities should favor legitimate marriage by means of a series of social and political actions which will guarantee a family wage, by issuing directives

ensuring housing fitting for family life and by creating opportunities for work and life.” (81)

“By virtue of this principle [of subsidiarity], the state cannot and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform... The public authorities must do everything possible to ensure that families have all those aids – economic, social, educational, political, and cultural assistance – that they need in order to face all their responsibilities in a human way.” (72)

The Holy Father also addressed other themes we have identified - urging that a true theology of work be developed to illumine the links between work and the family (23); noting that the family is “the domestic church” and that the future of evangelization depends on the church (65); and underscoring the primacy of parents in educating their children.

In summary, *Familiaris Consortio* teaches that the family is the core of all society for the family teaches one the meaning of love, which is self-giving. That love will spiral out, first, to other members of one’s own family, then to other families, then to society at large. The family is the vital core of society and its school of social virtue. Families must be involved in the political life of their societies to ensure that policies are adopted which protect and promote the family. Families must be involved in a wide range of organizations working for the common good, for justice, solidarity and charity, as well as for the defense of the family and marriage.

Ten years after *Familiaris Consortio*, the Holy Father returned to the family in the context of a restatement of all of Catholic social teaching on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. In *Centesimus Annus*, the Holy Father noted the crucial role of the family in combating individualism and in promoting life. Through the mutual gift of self in the family, one learns “what it actually means to be a person. Here we mean the family founded on marriage.” (39) “In order to overcome today’s widespread individualistic mentality, what is required is a concrete commitment to solidarity and charity, beginning with the family.” (50)

The Holy Father also reflected on the “culture of death,” reflections which he would expand and enrich in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, a few years later. Here, it was enough to note the fundamental fact - “In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life.” (#39)

In *Evangelium Vitae* itself, the Holy Father noted that “The underlying causes of attacks on life have to be eliminated, especially by ensuring proper support for families and motherhood. A family policy must be the basis and the driving force of all social policies. For this reason there needs to be set in place social and political initiatives capable of guaranteeing conditions of true freedom of choice in matters of parenthood. It is also necessary to rethink labor, urban, residential and social service policies so as to harmonize working schedules with time available for the family, so that it becomes effectively possible to take care of children and the elderly.” (90)

CONCLUSION

We have examined the role of the family in Catholic social thought, before Vatican II, at Vatican II and afterwards. We have seen that the family is at the very core of Catholic social thought. Even the human person himself can only find the meaning of his existence within relationship, and the family, founded on marriage, is the first and primary of all human relationships.

The family gives birth to civil society through the rearing and education of children who one day become citizens. The family is the vital core of society, and society will find its image reflected in the kinds of families that compose it.

For these and many other reasons, the state must respect the family. It is never entitled to substitute for it, but must assist it when – and only when – such assistance is needed.

Religious freedom is, as John Paul II noted in *Redemptor Missio*, “the premise and guarantee of all freedoms that ensure the common good.” (39) Faith passes through the parent to the child. Thus, the first of all freedoms is itself guaranteed by policies that support the family.

Likewise, “the fundamental right and source of all other rights... is the right to life.” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 72). Once again, it is the family that teaches and exemplifies the values that preserve life. Thus, if we are to build a culture of life, a family policy must be at the heart of all social policy.

“The future of humanity passes by way of the family.” (FC 86) The Church teaches that it is the task of families themselves to join with people of good will in building a society and state which respect, value, promote and defend the family.

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