
FAMILY PORTRAITS (1)



On the occasion of an important meeting of America's bishop's, Archbishop Brendan O'Brien, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, gave an important and well documented address on the situation of the family in Canada. Following are excerpts of this talk.

HAPPY FAMILIES

In Canada, building a strong union and a loving family is still an ideal for the majority of young adults, perhaps because of the example of enduring couples who witness to the possibility of a happy married life. Happy families are also an encouragement in that they prove the importance and impact of self-giving and unconditional love. There is much we can celebrate about the family in Canada. Parents who transmit to their children fundamental values so they will build their full human potential. Families that build a life together in which each member feels responsible for the others and shares their joys and sorrows. Parents who witness to their faith in all aspects of their lives, be it with friends or colleagues. Families that are involved in their parishes and communities. The increasing respect for the equality between men and women.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES

Canadian families are nevertheless confronted with enormous challenges. They see their unity, solidarity and survival threatened in ways that are not always evident to the primary players. Some of these pressures compromise the very future of this institution that has been desired by God since the beginning. Families grow or change with the rhythm of evolution and social disruption. As society's basic unit, families are subject to all the cultural forces, events and phenomena that mark the life of a country. Even though the federal and provincial governments of Canada state that they want to help the family and even establish some family policies, there is still much to be done in this area.

FAMILIES AND LIFE ITSELF ARE SCORNED

In our overly sexualized society, the family and life in general are scorned as much by laws as by individual behaviour. Materialism and individualism, mixed with a false conception of freedom and the relentless pursuit of personal and sexual pleasure, push many Canadians toward extravagant consumption and the seeking of comfort at any price. Many flout what is essential. Many have lost respect for life and human dignity as well as a sense of the meaning of life. Today, many social and moral factors threaten the integrity of the family. We shall examine some of the factors that confront couples who rise to the challenge of giving life to and educating children. However, let us first look at the results of the 2001 census from Statistics Canada, so we can consider the demographics of Canadian families.

MANY FACES OF THE FAMILY

The description of Canadian families and households offered by the 2001 census says quite a bit about the state of the basic unit of Canadian society. Despite much negative news about marriage, it still remains the number one choice for most couples. Therefore, 70 percent of families are composed of married couples, 16 percent are headed by single parents, and 14 percent by common-law couples. Out of all Canadian households, only half a percent are made up of same-sex partners. When a young man and a young woman decide to make a commitment, they often start out by living together, but 75 percent of these couples eventually marry. In this context, it is interesting to note that 68 percent of children, ages 0 to 14 years, live with their married parents, while 13 percent live with common-law parents. The remaining 19 percent live with one parent or the other.

SERIOUS THREATS

These figures give us a glimpse of one of the dangers Canadian families face. Each year separation and divorce cause extensive damage with serious consequences for individuals, families, and society as a whole. In 2000 there were 71,144 divorces compared to 157,395 marriages. Besides, the proportion of marriages expected to end in divorce by the 30th wedding anniversary was 37.7 percent. If one still needed convincing about the importance of marriage for children, it is found in the national survey on children and youth conducted in 1999. According to the results of this survey, 13.6 percent of children born of married parents who did not live together before the marriage see their parents split up. It is a much more serious picture for children of common-law parents, as 63.1 percent of them will live through the break-up of their family. As for children born of married parents who first lived common-law, they form an intermediary category: about 25 percent of them will experience family breakdown.

FREE-FALLING DEMOGRAPHICS

As in almost all other Western nations, Canada's population is aging. The number of live births is no longer high enough to ensure a renewal of the population. From 1970 to 1993, the fertility rate of Canadians dropped from 2.3 live births to 1.7. This means our country must look to immigration to maintain a reasonable demographic level and avoid economic collapse. Abortion is another danger for the family. A logical consequence of the failure of artificial contraception, abortion is also used as a method of birth control. Since 1988 there has been no law against abortion in Canada. It is available on request at any stage of pregnancy. In 2000, there were 32.2 abortions for every 100 live births, for a total of 105,427 abortions. One rarely or never hears about the "post-abortion syndrome", the name given to the devastating consequences that abortion has on many women.

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