
FAMILY PORTRAITS (2)



At the recent meeting of the Bishops of the American Church, Archbishop Brendan O'Brien, President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, gave an important address on the family. Following is a second series of excerpts.

A Precious Commodity: Time

Time is a rare commodity for families, especially when both parents are working outside the home, or when a single parent is responsible for the children's upbringing while working as well. Overburdened by their heavy schedules, parents are exhausted. They have almost no time to be together. They have little time to spend with their children or teens. Several studies have shown that parents spent 11 hours a week with their children in 2001, compared to 16 hours per week in 1991.

By constantly reducing the amount of time they spend together, the ties that bind family members become looser and are worn thinner. It would be much more advantageous to everyone in the family if they could rediscover the joy of sharing 1001 everyday activities, such as eating together, going for a walk or participating in a sport, praying together, or discussing current events. Families that put their life together first, often by making very real sacrifices where their career or lifestyles are concerned, give each other a remarkable gift. Less stressed and less tired, parents and children benefit from the joy of spending time and growing together.

THE WORKING WORLD

The working world is not always well adapted to the reality of family life. Even though the public sector offers well-defined advantages to employees to help them fulfil their commitments to their families, the private sector often does not. Some examples are: flexible hours, childcare at work, parental leave when a new child arrives in the family, and also a federal government proposal that would allow six weeks of compassionate leave to family members forced to leave work to be with another family member who is gravely ill or dying. The disproportionately high productivity requirements of some employers in the private sector, and their efforts to address the challenges of globalization, have a negative impact on many families. The insecurity and financial vulnerability that go hand in hand with a lack of job security, and the worry and ensuing poverty that can come from the loss of a job, combine to discourage young people from getting married and having a family. For them, it is often simpler just to live together and put off having children until much later. We must make the private sector more aware of the responsibility it has to respect the demands of the family lives of its employees.

SEX EDUCATION

It is important to mention another factor that impacts on future families: too often sex education as taught in public elementary and secondary schools is inadequate and often inaccurate. Under the guise of "protecting love" in the context of the AIDS epidemic which threatens heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, the condom is being promoted as the miracle solution for avoiding sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as well as AIDS. This constitutes a threat not only to young people's physical, emotional and moral health, but also to their capability to make a long-term commitment. Encouraged to be sexually active, young people multiply their pre-marital experiences, and accumulate many disappointments in love. Their bodies and souls are injured, and their ability to trust is slowly worn away - the trust that is so fundamental when building a lasting marriage. When faced with the inevitable conflicts that are a part of married life, how can we be surprised to see them run away from marital difficulties in search of new sexual adventures for which their sexual education, based on instant gratification, has prepared them?

THE MEDIA

Media also share a real responsibility for the current state of the Canadian family. They are no strangers to its past or its future. Though it is true that the media can present a convincing portrait of the importance of family and can be a powerful educational tool, they far too often present a reductive view of family life. It is impossible to overestimate the impact of the media on our mentality, particularly television, which often is the sole source of information and learning for many Canadians of all ages. The content of television shows frequently leaves much to be desired, and the program design is hardly better. Think for a moment about reality TV, or even soap operas or sit-coms that feature people whose moral behaviour goes against fundamental human values and, consequently, Christian values. Too often, marital infidelity and pre-marital sex are presented as everyday behaviour - with all the consequences this can have on family life and on the minds of impressionable children and teens who see these shows as a reflection of "normal life". The same can be said about divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality.

SUBSIDIARITY

Contrary to what we might hope, the State does not always accept the rule of subsidiarity where families are concerned. Instead of helping parents to assume their primary responsibilities as educators, it sometimes takes over their role. As an example, I will use the childcare policies put in place by the Government of Quebec to respond to the needs of the poorest families. At first glance, it seems like a shining example of inexpensive daycare that meets the needs and desires of many families. Upon closer examination, it is clear that it does not satisfy all parents. This policy supports families where both parents are employed outside the home. In 1998, the Vanier Institute of the Family reported that 64 percent of mothers who had children under three years old were employed. As for couples choosing to live on one salary to allow one parent or the other to stay home and educate their children, they receive hardly any government assistance. This is unfair. A government that is truly aware of the irreplaceable role of parents in the raising of future citizens should devote a greater portion of its tax money to help parents in this difficult task. True family-related policies, respectful of the choices of all parents, are sorely needed in Canada.

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