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The Family as a Dream and Resource for the Society

A Few weeks ago the *Time Magazine* published on its front cover the title “The Childfree life” (Aug. 12, 2013),¹ showing a bird’s-eye medium shot of a man and woman lying on sandy background, supposedly a beach. It is August and it seems obvious that they are on summer holidays. But the title and the cover story suggest something totally different. That is not about two weeks of break, but about the lifestyle, which binds happiness with the idea of not having children. “When having it all means not having children” – explains the subtitle. The message is clear: children are an obstacle to individual happiness and personal development. But if you look closely at the postures of these two people on the front cover, you will see that only their faces are leaning towards each other. Their bodies seem to be already lying in directly opposite directions. They meet briefly for an instant of carefree happiness, while ready to get up and each go their own way. Within the respective inside article, Lauren Sandler, the author, states that “she is not alone”, though meaning by this that she is not the only one who has chosen this lifestyle. In the Bible God says: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2, 18). Contemporary mainstream culture seems to proclaim quite the opposite message: “It is good to be alone”.

¹ See: L. Sandler, Having It All Without Having Children. The American birthrate is at a record low. What happens when having it all means not having children?

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2148636,00.html#ixzz2dkAq0MuT>

Is it good to be alone?

Blessed Pope John Paul II, in the exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, wrote about “the diminishing number of births, (...) the difficulty, if not the outright refusal, to make lifelong commitments, including marriage” (EE 8). The description of the problem in the exhortation is similar to the aforementioned weekly journal, though its evaluation of the situation is very different. The Pope does not bind this new lifestyle with happiness, but rather with the feeling of loneliness, the weakening of interpersonal solidarity and the missing structures of affection and support (See: EE 8). The fundamental question would hence be: Whose evaluation is more appropriate? It is true that Europe is facing “the second individualistic revolution” (Gilles Lipovetsky), characterized by the privatization of life and the strong greed for autonomy as opposed to any form of institution. Tzvetan Todorov named this phenomenon: “the tyranny of individuals”; Giuseppe De Rita called it: “egolatria”. Everyone would like to be a self-made man and his only master; totally independent from the others. But those who have chosen this model of individual autonomy usually suffer from loneliness. An American poet, E. E. Cummings (1894 – 1962) wrote a nice “visual” poem on the topic a leaf falls – loneliness.

There are only two ideas that one may extract from the poem: “loneliness”, and “a leaf falls”. You can read the poem, as you would watch a short movie wherein a leaf is slowly falling into the realm of loneliness. The letter "I", so similar to the number "1", appears five times in these two ideas. Placing them in the column, Cummings binds strongly the loneliness and the fall, the loneliness and the pain it brings to a person who has the feeling of being the only “one” in the world. Here “one”, in the verbal form, emerges six times in the poem. It is difficult to imagine that these two contradictory words can be attractive and painful at the same time.

Family as the main dream

If we observe the world around us, there is no doubt that the family in Europe is in crises. Yet the diminishing numbers of religious and civil marriages do not mean that a new form of relationship or of being are replacing the institution of marriage. There is rather, on the one hand, and as pointed out by Roberto Volpi in the Italian context, a growing number of people who are just living alone, while on the other hand, empirical researches resolutely illustrate that family always occupies the first place of the list of things most desired by people. Respondents of recent empirical research say they consider the family as the main place of security, refuge and of support in their lives.

In Italy, for example, around 80% of the youth who have reached marriageable age declare that they prefer marriage to cohabitation. It seems also, that from the 20% who prefer cohabitation, as little as 3% consider this form of relationship the ultimate choice. Instead, the other 17% regard cohabitation as a transitional phase for marriage.

In France, 77% of the youth in general desire to form their own family and keeping the same person for life. Of these 77%, a total of 84% were between 18 to 24 years.

In Poland, 85% of respondents affirm that they cannot imagine happiness without the family. Only 12% believe that they could be equally happy if they had not a family. 55% of respondents hold that the best form of family includes having both marriage with children. 29% would like to live in a large multi-generation family. As little as 1% prefer to live alone and another 1% would like to be single parents (CEBOS, March 2013). 75% of those who have parents visit them at least once a week (CEBOS, July 2013). Indeed, it is undeniable that family stability plays an important role in peoples desires and lives, despite the fact that the conviction that people should stay together

“forever” is less appreciated within today’s mainstream culture, and despite the fact that often it is presented as an unrealistic goal.

Research and its statistics therefore illustrate the fact that the family remains the most important point of reference for people reflecting on their future. One could safely affirm that this is the main dream and desire of the youth. But at the same time, this desire is often not accompanied by the Christian belief of love, that is: in fidelity and till the end of life. Pope John Paul II binds this phenomenon with the process of secularization and the kind of fear that it provokes. “This loss of Christian memory is accompanied by a kind of *fear of the future*. Tomorrow is often presented as something bleak and uncertain. The future is viewed more with dread than with desire”.

Given the current context of divorce and separation, we can also appreciate that, on the one hand, many young people enter into adulthood already having personal negative experiences of living within divorced or reconstructed families. The testimony of love unto death is missing in their life. On the other hand, many consider that the hardships and instabilities of the materialistic lifestyle which they live does not warrant the effort of passing it on to the next generation. Many are afraid of what the future will bring. If the future has nothing to offer, having children does not have any deeper meaning.

Fertility is no more regarded as a blessing. Even those who live in marriage often want to have only one child. (By the way, it is difficult to teach young people the real meaning of brotherhood in the society in which almost no one has a brother or sister). The demographic crisis in Europe is evident. It is worth to stress that, even if it is true that people in Europe, on average, have one child in contrast to their deepest desire to have at least two, the reasons for this are not just financial concerns. Indeed, while

Europe experiences a demographic winter, in Africa one can observe a demographic spring. Yet such results cannot be said to be for reasons that Africans are richer than Europeans. Undoubtedly, urgent and adequate family policy is certainly required. Yet this, in itself, would not solve all the problems. Practically one entire generation is now missing in Europe, and this is not due to any economic crisis, as the process of the demographic adolescent and youth decline began during times of prosperity. Equally, the missing generation is not due to the declining numbers of immigrants coming into Europe, as one may observe that second and third migrant generations suffer the same demographic tendency. What is missing is Hope.

Blessed Pope John Paul II, warned that Europe is experiencing the temptation of casting gloom over the brilliance of Hope: “This loss of Christian memory is accompanied by a kind of fear of the future. Tomorrow is often presented as something bleak and uncertain. The future is viewed more with dread than with desire. Among the troubling indications of this are the inner emptiness that grips many people and the loss of meaning in life. The signs and fruits of this existential anguish include, in particular, the diminishing number of births, the decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and the difficulty, if not the outright refusal, to make lifelong commitments, including marriage” (EE 8). From this perspective, it could be said that what is missing is not just a generation of youth or a certain age group. Europe needs to turn back to its Christian roots, that is, to Jesus Christ Who is alive, Who is the real source of Hope for the Old Continent, as noted in the title of the exhortation mentioned before, that is: *Ecclesia in Europa*.

Family as a resource for the society

Let me now summarize the data of some studies promoted by the Pontifical Council for the Family. The study, *Famiglia, risorsa della società*, or in English, *The Family, resource for society*, illustrates how, in actual fact, the family remains the fundamental and indispensable pillar of social life. In a globalized world we need more family and not less. The family is and remains forever the genome of society as expressed in classical times by Cicero: *familia est principium urbis and almost seminarium rei publicae*. More recently, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* similarly asserted: *familia schola quaedam uberius humanitatis* (The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity) (52). Therefore, to return to the outset of this section, allow me to provide you with, what I hope are, some useful guideposts, by presenting four separate areas of discussion and consideration.

1. The couple and marriage. The fact of getting married constitutes an added value for persons and for society, in that the marriage contract enhances the quality of the relationship of the couple and has important positive consequences (biological, psychological, economic and social) for children and adults. Simple cohabitation is not equal to marriage because it renders relations unstable and creates major uncertainty in the lives of children. Divorce itself (or the choice of single parenthood) increases the risk of school failure for children. The stability of family relations is a precious good, and when it is lacking, all members of the family are at risk. In particular, marriage stability is decisive for the successful socialization of children. Divorce, as well as birth outside marriage, increase the risk of poverty for children and mothers. Stepfamilies, reconstituted families and blended families experience many problems with respect to relations between the new parents and the children of their former unions. In contrast to these, marriage between a man and a woman, generates benefits that other forms of “living together” do not.

2. Intergenerational Concerns. Natural families experience solidarity between generations much more frequently and more deeply than other forms of life in common. Children who live with their own biological parents enjoy better physical and psychological health, and experience more trust and hope in life, in comparison with those who live in other contexts. For example, adolescent children of married couples are at less risk of developing deviant behaviors (including abuse of alcohol and drugs) than those living with single parents, unmarried couples or separated couples.

The analysis of three different family structures, intact two-parent families, blended families and single-parent families, demonstrates the greater fragility of the latter two patterns. In blended families following separation, the parents have major difficulties in developing their educational role and are more often in disagreement with each other as regards educational themes. Single parents or those separated or divorced are characterized by major distrust of external social contexts and develop a privatized vision of the family. Children of divorced parents exhibit increased incidence of major psychological illnesses and states of anxiety.

Even worse, studies show that children raised without a father account for a very high percentage of the homeless, of adolescents who commit homicides, of adolescent suicides and of incarcerated youth. This last data gives serious grounds for caution when we speak of alternative “families.” All too often, decisions, even legislative decisions, seem to be made without taking into account the tragic consequences that might result.

3. Family and Work. The ways of relating to the world of work are varied: there are couples where one works and the other takes care of children at home. In other couples one works full time and one part-time. Others still, choose the double career. It is crucial to remember that the family constitutes an incredibly rich resource for the world of work, much more than the world of work benefits the family. In other words, the world

of work “exploits” the family-resource and does not take sufficiently into account the demands of family life. It is enormously difficult for families, especially those with children, to harmonize family and professional life. As a consequence, the world of work, recognizing the importance of the family to human society, should organize itself in a way that puts the needs of the family first.

4. Family and Social Capital. The family is the primary source of the social capital. The social capital consists of relations of trust, cooperation and reciprocity that the family creates both internally (called bonding social capital) and in external networks, that is in kinship, neighborhood, friendship groups, associations (bridging social capital). This social capital is the basis of the social virtues (and not just of individuals). In short, the family is a source of added social value not only as it forms better individuals in terms of their health and well-being, but also because it creates a social fabric, means a civil and public sphere, which requires values and rules of human life and thus promotes the common good.

Moreover, the fact that the family is a primary school of love and gratitude is manifested in a particular way in families where weak and disabled members are present, because the person in difficulty requires a special organization of family life. Families in such circumstances develop specific virtues that can be called empowerment and resilience. Such virtues bring with them social advantages that the family with disabled or dependent members offers to society. As a matter of fact, the effort that these families undertake for the rehabilitation and social inclusion of their disabled or dependent member in all spheres of society, from school to work, reflects a humanizing belief in the possibility of social inclusion and human solidarity, in particular with regard to the weakest and most marginalized. These families provide domestic care for the seriously disabled, thereby activating the virtues that family members practice in

being care-givers, each according to his or her specific capabilities. Another example of families that clearly generate benefits for all of society can be found in those that adopt children or act as foster parents, an extraordinary phenomenon of generosity to combat loneliness with love. Many other examples could be added, but these, I believe, are ample enough to both underline and illustrate the fact that the family is still a tremendous resource for our society.

No doubt, some may say that the family has changed over the centuries. But we must also realize that, whatever circumstances families may encounter on an empirical level, the family's constitutional genome does not cease to be the source and origin of society. Without this 'social genome,' society would lose the quality and power of the family as a living organism (the fundamental cell) which, rather than being a burden on society, constitutes the primary vehicle for the humanization of persons and social life.

Thank you for your attention.