

FAMILY RESOURCE OF SOCIETY

A Synthesis of the results from a research on the family as a social resource and implications for new family policies

On the world level, the debate concerning the family is centred today on a fundamental question: whether the natural family (be it nuclear - i.e. the stable couple man-woman with their children – or extended, in case it includes in the household near relatives), continues to be a resource for the person and society, or rather is something of the past that now constitutes an obstacle for the emancipation of individuals and the future of free, equalitarian and happy society? Certainly the present day family is losing protections it once enjoyed in the past and is facing new challenges, in that, society does not favour it, and in the best case scenario, is indifferent to it. Individuals make a family in different ways and society encourages the maximum amount of flexibility and variability. But what are the consequences? Moreover, what can be done?

The Pontifical Council for the Family (PCF) has tried to respond to these fundamental questions with an original research published in two volumes “*La famiglia risorsa della società*” (editor Pierpaolo Donati, il Mulino Publ., Bologna, 2012) and *The Conyugal Family, An irreplaceable Resource for society*, P.P. Donati and P. Sullins, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

The investigations has produced clear results. I will provide a brief synthesis of them in four areas.

1) ***The couple and marriage.*** The fact of getting married constitutes an added value for persons and for society in that the marriage contract betters the quality of the marriage and the relations of the couple and has important positive consequences (biological, psychological, economic and social) for children and adults. Cohabitation is not equal to marriage, because it renders relations more instable and creates major uncertainty in the lives of children. Divorce (or a decision not to marry) increases the risk of scholastic failure of children. The stability of family relations emerge as a precious good, and when lacking, all members of the family are at risk. In particular, marriage stability is decisive for the successful socialization of children. Divorce and birth outside of marriage increases the risks of poverty for children and mothers. *Stepfamilies, reconstituted, blended families* reveal many problems regarding the relations between the new parents and the children of the partner. The theory of the individualization of the couple and marriage is substantially falsified; indeed, individuals making up the couple search, most assuredly, for their autonomous identity, but this identity is constituted only within a web of relations that connects the families of origin and the primary networks to which each partner belongs (friendship, work, daily living webs of relations). The conditions of the persons who, for some reason, are not married, are generally worse than those of the people who are married. Marriage brings goods in itself. The ethnic minorities are also favoured by marriage.

2) ***Relations between generations.*** The natural families realize the solidarity between generations much more often and better than other forms of life. Children who live with their own biological parents enjoy better physical and psychological health, and experience more hope in life, in respect to those who live in other contexts. The analysis of three different family structures, in particular, unbroken two parent family, blended families and single parent families demonstrate the major fragility of the latter two family structures. In blended families following separation, the parents have major difficulties in developing their educative role and are more often in disagreement with each other as regards educational themes. Single parents or those separated and divorced are characterized by a major distrust toward the external social context and develop a privatized vision of the family. The breaking of the conjugal bond leads people to adopt a certain closure toward the external world and develops an intimate vision of family life, so that people are not inclined to assume social responsibilities within the community. Particularly lacking is the capacity of the single parent family to transmit cultural values, and especially solidarity, between the generations in an effective way, because these parents must confront alone the challenges associated with the upbringing of children and the concomitant pressures at work. Adolescents of married couples are less at risk than those living with single parents, unmarried couples or separated couples for developing deviant behaviours (including abuse of alcohol and drugs). Children of divorced parents suffer major psychological illnesses and states of anxiety.

3) ***Family and work.*** Couples are diversified in their way of relating to the world of work according to different preferences of men and women: there are couples where only one partner works while the other partner takes care of the children at home, other couples opt for a partner to work full time and the other partner to work part time, other couples choose two full time careers. What is important is to note that the family constitutes a resource for the world of work much more than the other way around. In other words, the world of work “exploits” the family-resource and does not take sufficiently into account the demands of family life. There are enormous difficulties for families, especially those with children, to harmonize family and professional life. It is necessary for the world of work to organize itself in a way that is subsidiary to the demands and needs of the family.

4) ***Family and social capital.*** The natural family is the source of primary social capital of society. Social capital consists in relations of trust, cooperation and reciprocity that the family creates both within its own internal system (called social capital *bonding*) and in external networks, that is in family relationships, neighbours, friends, voluntary associations (social capital *bridging*). Familiar social capital is the basis of social virtues (i.e. the virtues shared by people in their relations, not only as a matter of individual behaviour). In essence, the family is the source of added social value not only because it forms the best individuals as regards their personal health and wellbeing, but also and above all, because it generates a social fabric, i.e. a public and civil sphere, that requires and rewards basic human values and promotes the common good. In regard to these goods, the family receives and produces them at the same time. The research does not confirm the so-called “amoral familism thesis” (which supports the argument that the inability of the citizens to act together for their common good is due to the existence of a nuclear family unable to pursue any end transcending its immediate, material interest),

while showing that the natural (normally constituted) family is the bearer of a positive ‘moral familism’.

These results brings one to a very precise conclusion: the natural (normally constituted) family is and remains a vital source of society. The globalized society requires more and more, and not less and less, *the multiple role of mediation* that the family is called to develop in enhancing the flourishing of personal and social virtues. Indeed, the research has demonstrated that the detachment from the natural family and/or its deconstruction do not improve the existential conditions of persons, but make them worse. The family can be organized in many different ways regarding issues of daily life, such as its internal division of labour and the decision-making process between its members, but to put the family in doubt and disempower it means to produce a society in which people become weaker subjects in need for more social assistance, rather than actors/agents able to generate and regenerate the human and social capital needed to sustain a viable society.

One can say that today we are entering a new historical phase, after the *de-institutionalization* of the family. One might argue that changes in behaviour can generate structures and relational assets that confer a new sense to the institution of the family.

We must realize that, whatever changes the family may meet at the empirical level, however, the family’s constitutional genome does not cease to be the foundation and origin (“*fons et origo*”) of society. Without this social genome, the society loses the quality and power of that living organism (the fundamental cell) that, rather than being a weight for society, constitutes the primary vehicle for the humanization of persons and social life.

The positive quality of the family is manifested in a particular way in those families where weak and disabled members are present, because special organizational demands are required by the person in difficulty. These families develop special virtues that can be called *empowerment* and *resilience*. Such virtues bring with them *social advantages* that the family with disabled or dependent members offer to society. As a matter of fact, the effort that these families undertake for the rehabilitation and social inclusion of the disabled or dependent person in all social spheres, from school to work, means to believe in the possibility of social inclusion and human solidarity, in particular in respect to the weakest and most marginalized people. These families provide integral domestic care for the gravely disabled thereby activating those potential virtues that family members have to be care givers giving each to the other according to his or her specific needs. Another example of families that generate benefits for the entire society are those that adopt children or act as foster parents.

The current prevalent cultural climate, namely postmodernism, seems to undervalue these results. Instead of taking note of the positive and irreplaceable functions of the family, modernized societies seem to treat the natural family as *a new risk* for psychological, social and cultural integration of persons and for creating the social fabric. The reasons for this perspective are based on economic concerns. The family is considered as a negative social constraint (a negative bond between persons) that

reduces the availability of individuals to participate in a flexible way in the labour market, adversely affects the fertility ratio (the argument is that the birth rate increases if people are not bound by marriage, which is too heavy to carry on), and in general limits the chances available to individuals. The question raised is the following: in what type of society do we live where the nuclear family based on marriage has become a risk to individuals and society, something to avoid, rather than the sphere of human fulfilment, that cradle of civilization, where persons are loved for whom they are and not what they do?

In conclusion, the researches of the PCF has verified that the natural (normally constituted) family is the primary resource of society and remains the vital source of those societies which are bearers of the future. The reason for this is simple: the family provides the human, spiritual and social capital of society. The civil capital of society is generated by the exclusive and essential virtues of the family. The globalized society will find a future of civility if and in the measure in which it will be capable of promoting a culture of the family able to rethink the family as the vital nexus between private and public happiness. The empirical research shows that the family becomes more and more the decisive factor for the material and spiritual wellbeing of persons. From these dynamics we can understand why and how the family nourishes those personal and social virtues that create a good society.

On the operative level, one can trace the implications of the results of this investigation. It is a question of acknowledging a new culture of the rights of the family. Families can perform their duties, develop their potential, and create trust and social solidarity to the extent that they can enjoy their own rights as families, i.e. as relational spheres endowed with their social qualities and properties, not as mere aggregates of individuals. In practice, this means that the *rights of citizenship of the family* must be recognized. The family is a social subject that has its own complex set of rights-duties in the civil and political community by reason of the essential role that it exercises.

Political and social systems should be valued on the basis of the type and grade of promotional recognition given to the family as a social subject that generates relational goods. One needs to take into consideration that certain socio-political systems, rather than valuing and promoting families that produce individual and social goods, penalize them, because their social functions are not recognized, particularly in the welfare and fiscal sectors. This devaluation of the family explains the decline in birth rates, the ageing of the population, the fragmentation and deterioration of the social fabric, and most social pathologies.

Social policies can be defined as family friendly on the condition that they seek *to make the family*, and are not limited only to pursuing goals of wellbeing for the population in the abstract. Sustaining work, birth rates, equal opportunities, reducing poverty, and increasing social inclusion are noble and positive targets to be pursued. But the trouble is that, in pursuing these goals without a proper reference to the family, the family is left apart, and withers away. In many cases, political goals do not promote the family as such, they claim that the promotion of the family will follow from other social policies, which is not true. Generic welfare policies cannot be automatically defined as sustaining and promoting the social value of the family. One needs to create specific, direct and

explicit measures in favour of the family. Family policies should directly and explicitly sustain the social functions of the family and acknowledge its added social value. They must recognize that the family is a form of social capital. Specifically, one must highlight the politics of work-family balance. It is necessary to couple the policies of equal opportunities between men and women (*gender mainstreaming*) with an adequate *family mainstreaming*, that consists in political support for family relations, that is, relations of reciprocity between the sexes and among the generations that make up the family. The policies of equal opportunities often fail, and in certain cases create new traps, particularly for women, because they are not relational, i.e. they do not take into consideration the fact that people are linked together in a family, which binds them at the same time that it provides them care and daily resources. When people must make a decision, in taking or leaving a job, changing the place to live, etc., they shall relate to their family, so must do social policies. The politics of *family mainstreaming* must focus on intra-family and extra-family relations in order to correct negative and perverse effects of those politics that have been, until now, directed towards the individuals as such, without taking into account their family relations. A positive example in such a direction are the *Local alliances for the family*, that is those practices which mobilize private and public actors in a local community to pursue family friendly policies by building *ad hoc* networks connecting their interventions in all the spheres of daily life.

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