

Taking up the Cause of the Family¹

For a long time, the presumption has been that the pressures and stresses upon marriage and the family were largely economic. Whether from the left or the right of politics, the solution proposed has been to offer financial incentives to marry and have children. This comes in the form of government helping with the costs of childcare or tax breaks and so on. While all these things may help, none of them will rescue either marriage or the family. It is not primarily dollars and cents that are reasons why fewer are marrying and even fewer having children (or more than one child), it is a clash of cultures, values, and desires that is at the centre of this vexing issue for church and state. It is not that people find marriage and family financially daunting (which they certainly may be) but that we live in a culture in which neither marriage nor family are highly valued or honoured as the basic shape of life in our society. There is no secret to fact that some churches have been very visible in their support of alternatives to marriage and family and thus reflect these same dangerous thoughts with a religious stamp of approval.

The first problem is marriage itself. Our culture has emphasised the individual to the detriment of nearly every form of relationship - from spousal to friendship - leaving us not only increasingly isolated but unwilling to venture out beyond the screen for personal contact. Men are stigmatised as having a toxic masculinity and women who marry are stigmatised as being oppressed or even enslaved by men or by the very institution of marriage. We have not only redefined marriage and who may be married but we have made marriage unattractive and incompatible with the modern ideals for personhood, independence, and individualism.

The next issue is children. Children are a big reason for marriage and if children are no longer on the radar of people considering marriage, it is harder to make the case for marriage. Children have come to be seen as necessary evils in our modern culture. We idealise youth but not childhood. We leave the rearing of children to day-care centres and tend to the essential family needs while trying to keep a balance in which we have time for ourselves. Watch the home shows on TV and you will hear people insist that the must-haves are a home office for husband and wife, plenty of recreational space, informal space, and a spa-like master bath in a bedroom no longer just for sleeping. What you often do not hear is the desire for family space or space for children.

Until we are willing to see children as essential to the shape of the marriage and family life, it will be hard for financial incentives to entice unwilling people to have a child or more than one. What must happen is nothing less than the restoration of marriage and family as the most honoured of estates and essential to the hopes, dreams, and desires of the individual as well as the society as a whole. Here the Church has something to offer. Instead of trying to pander to those who turn up their noses as these traditional institutions created and ordered by God, we need to preach and teach marriage and the family more urgently and more eloquently. It is a false choice to say that our only option for avoiding irrelevance is to embrace same sex marriage, friends with benefits, domestic partnerships, cohabitation, and the ever-burgeoning array of sexual identities. In fact, this is exactly what will kill marriage and the family and the Church.

If we look into the Sunday school rooms of the average congregation and wonder where the children are, or the pews and wonder where the families are, we have no one but ourselves to blame. We thought the government could shore up the weak foundations of these vaunted institutions so essential to both church and state and failed to catechise the children generations ago into the order God established for our human lives and society AND for the Church. That failure is now unmistakable. We were so preoccupied with talking to our kids about condoms and drugs that we forgot to instil in them a positive view of marriage and the family. We were so busy telling them how bad homosexuality and gender fluidity were that we forgot to tell them how holy, godly, good, right, and salutary marriage and family are. All the money in the world from the government will not restore the tattered image we have left to our children of that which reflects God's highest good - husband, wife, parent, and child.

¹ Reworking of an article written by Rev. Larry A. Peters, pastoralmeanderings.blogspot.com