

MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC BISHOPS
STATEMENT ON THE FAMILY

Family: The Key To A Healthy Society



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Family: The Key To A Healthy Society

Pope John Paul II's assertion that "the future of humanity passes by way of the family" (*Famillaria Consortio* 86, hereafter cited as *FC*), is an undeniably important truth for the health and security of our society. There is an intimate connection between family and society which "demands that family be open to and participate in society and its development, and so also requires that society should never fail in its fundamental task of respecting and fostering the family" (*FC* 45). Inspired by this truth, we have decided to develop the notion of family as a unifying principle and to use it to assess proposed legislation and governmental policies and programs in the light of their impact on family life in the Commonwealth.

The economic challenges facing the Commonwealth are severe. Even more critical to our well-being is the continuing erosion of family life. Our society, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, suffers from patterns of poverty, a chilling disregard for life with 46,000 abortions each year, a shocking rate of child and wife abuse, crimes of violence, a growing crisis in health, education and housing, and the pressing challenge of alcohol and drug abuse. These and other ills, we are convinced, reflect the deteriorating state of family life. Unless government acknowledges and seeks to strengthen the key role of family in society, then legislation and executive initiatives will have partial success at best in addressing the critical problems facing Massachusetts.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. **The measure and standard remains the family in its traditional definition.** The reality of "family" refers originally and properly to the common life of a man and woman in lawful union together with their children. It is particularly important to keep this in mind as a norm, especially in reference to the increasing numbers of those living in other familial patterns (spouses without children, adoptive parents, single parents, surviving spouses, foster care homes, etc.). Only by

keeping this norm clearly in mind can society respond adequately to all, especially those who are most needy or who are living in particularly trying circumstances. The norm itself does not exhaust all that the Church seeks to foster when it speaks of family life. It is essential, however, that there be a norm by which clarity of discussion about legislation which affects family life can be promoted.

Family is based on the institution of marriage with its "interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive". (*FC* 11) The family has been called by the Second Vatican Council "an intimate community of life and love" and "a school for human enrichment". (*Gaudium et Spes* 48 & 52, hereafter cited as (*GS*) The Council goes on to say "the family is the place where different generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize the rights of individuals with other demands of social life; as such it constitutes the basis of society. (*GS* 52) Small wonder John Paul II can say: "Family, become what you are". (*FC* 17)

When this vision of family is achieved in fact, great benefit follows. However, there are unfortunately today too many situations in which this is not the case. The family should be the privileged place where a community of persons is formed which will serve life and participate in the development of society. (cf. *FC* 17) Such a community is built on love, mutual respect, co-responsibility and stewardship of one another and of the goods of the family. **It is a place of true and wholesome intimacy where customs and traditions are passed on and the quality of relationships built up within the family can become the pattern and model for relationships in the wider community.**

Because these qualities so often appear to be lacking in today's families, some wish to discard the norm and re-define the family from merely statistical perspectives of sociological models. Because we are convinced that this vision and these qualities are so essential for the good of all families and for our own communities, we urge that this norm be upheld as the standard to guide our efforts to help families so that, whatever their composition or shape, they might nourish the kinds

of qualities that guarantee good family life as the basis for sound community life.

2. **The state has a stake in the family.** The state cannot be agnostic toward the family and must recognize that the common good of the society depends on sound family life. The Second Vatican Council says: "Civil authority should consider it a sacred duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality and to promote domestic prosperity" (GS 52). If family life is ignored or despised or undermined, then there is no natural foundation for social and civic life. Without this natural basic cell, the only institutions that remain are institutions of social custom or social contract which are then subject to manipulation by whatever social or civic groups are more powerful. The state, however, can guarantee against such manipulation by recognizing the rights of the family in society. The Holy See, in 1983, published a "Charter of the Rights of the Family" which spells out in detail these rights and which could serve as a standard guide for legislation and programs that touch the family.

3. **The more the family is respected and fostered, the more the state will be able to advance the common good.** Family politics includes the call to families to be the first instruments of social responsibility. As much as the state encourages healthy family life, to that extent the state can expect the family to play its role in transforming society. The common good is more than the sum total of individual goods. It is more surely attained by a mutual interaction between state concern for the family and family concern for the good of society.

4. **The principle of subsidiarity is to be applied in judging existing programs and institutions as well as new proposals.** Some institutions in our society cause more stress than support for families. These social institutions which assume responsibilities that properly should be left to the families themselves often contribute to alienation

and division within the family unit. Programs and institutions should not seek to replace the family but should serve the family and enable the family to assume its proper role using the means it needs to achieve the ends for which the family is the best provider.

The Church plays its part in this process. Catholic education, on all levels, including adult education, is the most notable example. However, the Church also provides day care in parish communities, soup kitchens and hot meal programs, shelters for homeless families, and other care for the poor and the needy. In recent years, special programs for women who are pregnant, many in their teens, others older, and care for single parents have been developed on a diocesan and on a parish level. There are many intermediate groups under Church auspices which make and will continue to make important contributions that respond to real needs. The state should recognize and encourage these while at the same time readily accepting its proper responsibility for the overall common good by providing those additional programs that will ensure that no one in our society fails outside the parameters of the life of the community. According to ability, each person and every institution should be ready to contribute toward the building up of a healthy family life.

5. Evaluating legislation and programs from the perspective of the family gives us criteria that will benefit every person in society. Such an approach will not discriminate against the unmarried nor against those who are in non-traditional families. In fact, it is the one way to guarantee that the human qualities by which life is measured and the rights which every person has will be observed and advanced. In our approach to key questions that face us as a society we will consciously use the criteria of family life, because it is the best standard against which to judge the adequacy or inadequacy of specific proposals, legislation and programs. As Pope John Paul II rightly says, "Whole civilizations and the cohesiveness of peoples depend above all on the human quality of their families... in their primary task of being the primary place of humanization for the person and society." (*Christifideles Laici* 40)

KEY ISSUES

1. **The Family Itself**

The stability of the family is severely threatened in our Commonwealth and throughout the nation. Forty-eight percent of mothers with children under one year old work outside the home at least part-time; 70 percent of mothers with school age children do the same. In less than 10 percent of our nation's families do mothers stay at home and fathers work, as was once so common. One in four pre-schoolers live in poverty. One in five babies is born out of marriage, 25 percent of the nation's children live in single parent homes. There is a 700 percent increase in the divorce rate since the turn of the century with one out of two marriages ending in divorce. Two million children qualify as "battered". Between 1970 and 1980 there was a 15 percent increase in unmarried persons living together. Add to this the particular situations that untold persons face of sexual violence, drug abuse, an environment of crime and little or no regard for life and whatever the statistics, the conclusions are obvious: the family is in danger and we cannot respond to this whole gamut of problems with palliatives or ill-conceived programs, born of individualistic ideologies or standardless emotionalism.

What is the key? The key is to evaluate the strengths which the traditional family offers and to attempt to make these strengths available in situations and circumstances where they are needed. It is not sufficient, for example, to provide just any kind of day care. The best day care is that which a mother provides for her child in her home. What about family allowances to poor nuclear families? What about adequate AFDC payments as well as programs to assist in household budgeting and in parenting skills? We need a legislative creativity which will ensure that poor families receive the monetary assistance necessary, but also that what they receive encourages and enables them to live their lives as a family unit and not as individual recipients of state largesse.

For this to occur:

(a) Legislation and state programs should openly acknowledge a bias in support of the family. They should encourage families to stay together. They should provide help to the family as a unit. They should

be sufficiently flexible to encourage families to stay together and work cooperatively for the good of all members of the family. They should grant families the financial means to make choices in regard to the care and education of their children. They should not unduly penalize a mother who needs or chooses to be at home with her children.

(b) Special support must be given to single parent families to respond to the fact that one adult - usually the mother - is being asked to provide the home and support that it normally takes two adults to provide. That is the standard by which day care, AFDC, health care and education should be measured. One example of this is child support. The law should see to it that those who owe child support in fact fulfill their obligations. Day care must be expanded, but in ways that would allow parental, extended family and neighborhood collaboration to shape the programs and thus guarantee that the cultural, religious and moral values of the families be included in the activities of the center.

(c) Programs should be reviewed and, where necessary, changed in order to respond more quickly and effectively to domestic violence, to sexual abuse, especially of children, and to the various ways that exploitation goes on within a family. Statistics about domestic violence against women and children are chilling and should spur society to take every possible step to protect women and children.

(d) Programs should be provided that will help young families, especially teenage parents, or teenage mothers alone with their children, to learn to cope with life and to develop the domestic skills that are needed in terms of providing food, clothing, shelter and education for their children. Cooperative efforts between the state and charitable agencies can do much in this area.

(e) Legislation should be passed to provide pregnancy leave, parental leave and other benefits that would favor the domestic harmony and potential of the family. No person should be punished economically because of pregnancy or parental duties properly carried out. Serious consideration should be given to how this might apply to families with aged or ill members living at home. Seen from the perspective of family

and not just the individual, these issues take on their proper importance.

(f) No legislation should be passed and no program approved that compromises the family or takes from the family those roles and initiatives that are proper to it. The extension of the title "family" to gay and lesbian couples and the granting of economic privileges to "domestic partners" on an equal plane with true families must be opposed and rejected as undermining the family in our society today.

(g) Finally, we commit ourselves once again to do everything we can to bring an end to the scourge of abortion and to provide women with alternatives to protect life from the moment of conception. Pro-life means care for woman and child with respect for the true dignity of everyone involved: children, women, men and the society as a whole. We will not compromise our position that life is to be respected from the very moment of conception to the moment of natural death. We will defend the rights of the unborn and we will offer care and help to pregnant women confident that our position is the only position that offers true respect to the value and dignity of both woman and child. We will offer help and support to the woman and child after birth according to need; similarly we will reach out to those fathers who are raising children without the help of the child's mother.

2. **Housing**

There is a great need for affordable housing in our Commonwealth. This is especially true regarding young couples who, in most cases, cannot afford to buy homes in the neighborhoods where they grew up. While that fact is not in itself a proof of injustice, it remains true that affordable housing is not available to the extent that it should be. Such housing should take into consideration the real needs of families. Units should be sufficiently varied in size and accommodation that families of different sizes will be able to find adequate housing. The specter of homeless families in our communities is a haunting one. Cooperation between the public and private sectors will be helpful in this matter.

3. **Health Care**

Massachusetts' claim of universal health care has not born fruit. The cost of health insurance continues to skyrocket. Hospital care is increasingly expensive and beyond the reach of those who do not have good health insurance. Medicare and Medicaid do not seem to provide what once it was hoped they would provide. There is an increasing number of families without health insurance. For those at the margins of our society the need is so great: the elderly who face expensive nursing care, those who suffer a catastrophic illness, the pregnant teenager who needs prenatal care, the poor working mother who cannot afford to get sick, the undocumented with no health coverage at all. Without prejudging any plan, are there not ways to provide health care on a family basis that will in fact help contain costs while providing for the needs of a family and its members? What of the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, most of whom have either fallen back on families with limited resources or are left to join the growing homeless population? The mentally ill and their families deserve our attention. It is unfair to ask families without adequate means to care for the mentally ill with no response whatsoever from society.

4. **Food**

Food stamps are a way of life for all too many families. The basic right to food has been placed in jeopardy by lack of funds and by a program that has not always been clear either in its function or its formulation. Do we not need to shape programs that will provide education about good nutrition for families? Can we not find ways for neighborhood groups to work together to help families learn how to shop wisely, how to buy what is best, both nutritionally and economically, and how to ensure that the younger generation will grow in a healthy way because of a healthy diet?

5. **Education**

Many families spend all the money they have available for education. Many others feel they cannot provide their children with the education they would like because of lack of funds. Is it not time to reassess educational goals in the Commonwealth and to ask ourselves what we are really providing? It is the constant teaching of the

Church that the primary educators of children are parents whose wishes must be respected. We are committed to aiding families in being able to make choices regarding their children's education. This includes choices regarding their culture and their values, their faith and their vision of life. It also means providing the skills their children need for their mature life.

Catholic education should be recognized by the Commonwealth for all it offers to students and to the society in general. Laws that are restrictive of parents who choose to send their children to Catholic (or other non-public) schools, laws that prohibit children from receiving help that is given to all children in public schools, are patently unfair and will continue to receive our opposition. In addition, we will seek to promote the best in education for all and will do so by urging that families be guaranteed support in their proper role in the education of their children.

6. Environment

The environment is an important factor in the quality of family life. The environment includes the air we breathe and the resources we use. It focuses on the proper stewardship of this world's goods so that no one will be deprived of what in justice a person may need. Everyone, including future generations, ought to have access to the gifts of nature. We will support those measures that will work toward an equitable sharing of the earth's resources and which will protect our natural resources from depletion. We will also support those measures that make for a cleaner, healthier environment.

Such an environment refers not just to the quality of air and water but also to the social environment. Too many families live in fear in their own neighborhoods. Crime and violence stalk too many streets, too many communities. Families have a right to live in peace and reasonable harmony, free from the constant threat of crime, violence and drugs. Especially in light of the increased violence that has recently marked our cities, we are committed to every effort to free our neighborhoods and our families from these scourges and to support all just efforts to eliminate crime, violence and substance abuse that threaten family life and all too often destroy families in the process.

CONCLUSION

In the legislative year ahead, we will bring our perspective of the family to the fore as we examine the issues that correspond to the six areas we have just outlined.

Our society must be responsive to the just needs and demands of families because families are the way to a sound, peaceful, just society. Without the family there is social dissolution and eventual chaos. Our society must be responsible because we recognize that persons and families have rights; rights that must be protected and fostered for the good of the person, of the family and of the community. We are responsible for one another. In no place is that mutual responsibility felt more keenly or lived more truly than in the family. The more we as a society acknowledge this truth and live according to it, the healthier and sounder will be our social and civic life. We know that every healthy family, and especially the Christian family, will "offer a witness of generous and disinterested dedication to social matters" which will extend to everyone in society; to the poor, to the disadvantaged and to "those who have no family". (FC 47)

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