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Faith Today

Along the tightrope of change

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP
NC News Service

Sunday afternoons are a special time for me. I save them for my greatest luxury — visiting friends. One Sunday recently was no exception. I spent it with friends I have known since before they were married, and whom I shall call Phil and Alice.

In some ways they are a traditional family. But within that traditional context we can see changes that are altering the shape of family life.

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As I arrived at the home of Phil and Alice, their 3-year-old started chasing his older sister around the house with a make-believe tomahawk while Alice, who was changing the baby on the living room floor, tried to restore order. Phil, who is a good cook, was in the kitchen already at work on dinner.

The tomahawker took a flying leap over the baby in hot pursuit of his sister. "A bit of change from the calm life of the laboratory," I said, referring to Alice's former work. Phil and Alice were career professionals when I first met them.

"Change!" said Alice, as she tried to wrestle her budding gymnast into a clean diaper.

"The only thing that hasn't changed in my life is having at least one kid who always

seems to need a change."

An hour later we sat down to what would prove to be a very enjoyable dinner. My friends, with the skill of miracle workers, got the two older children to take part in a blessing before dinner.

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In many ways we had a very traditional Sunday afternoon. But, as I noted, Phil and Alice typify a pattern of changes that are common today.

Alice completed her education and began her own career before marrying. Then the young couple had to shift from

two salaries to one when their children began to arrive. Phil shares in the child-rearing and household responsibilities.

But then there are other changes that are less obvious and perhaps even more important. How can we characterize them?

Experts in family studies sum them up in one word — "individualism." They say that the American family, which once saw itself as a functioning unit, now prefers to see itself as a gathering of individuals.

A century ago the family was a necessary social and economic unit. That has changed. Now it is becoming an arrangement of convenience for its individual members. It provides a source of affection for as long as the family members believe they need one; it also coordinates the access by family members to the services society provides.

Once these needs are met, according to experts, family members see themselves at liberty to go their own ways and do their own thing.

But according to church teaching the Christian family is different. It is more than the sum of

its members. If the family is regarded only as a group of individuals, an invisible but essential reality about the family is overlooked.

What this overlooks is the fact that the family is a genuine religious unit, a part of the body of Christ. It is a group united not just by common consent but by real, sacramental bonds.

As I see it, this is the principal challenge facing the church today: How do we help the family to see that it is more than just a gathering of individuals? How do we, in our local communities, help the family define itself in concrete terms?

We live in a society of individuals. So how do we make our beliefs in the importance of relationships real?

My friends Phil and Alice have decided to take this challenge seriously. They give prime time to family events and they weave their faith through the events of each day. They believe that their dining room table is an important religious center, just as the parish church is.

This is also the view of the church. But making this view a real part of life today can be an uphill struggle.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

The American family, writes Father David O'Rourke, now sees itself as a collection of individuals. The challenge facing the church in this time of change, he says, is to help the family see that it is so much more.

