

Of parishes and parents

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

"Support for parents by parishes is absolutely crucial today," observed Father Steven Preister in an interview. He is founder and director of the National Center for Family Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

While "families have always needed support," the priest said, it is apparent that times have changed. Today's parents face new and difficult challenges that make parish involvement more important than ever.

"We've always had extended families available to us," Father Preister said. "But between 1975 and 1980 50 percent of U.S. citizens changed households. That mobility means there is no network of friends or family."

Other statistics are equally illuminating. Only 13 percent of U.S. families are composed of fathers who work and mothers who stay home with children. Sixty percent of all women with children are employed outside the home. Nearly half of all children will live for a time with only one parent before they are grown. By 1990 the number of families with a single parent or divorced and remarried parents will exceed the number with two parents never divorced.

So what's a parish to do? Father Preister thinks the first priority is for parishes "to have a broad definition of family life. The variety of kinds of families have to be taken into account when designing programs."

Parishes can then begin to structure families together in small communities. "Opportunity" is the key word here, Father Preister indicated. "The parish needs to provide the opportunity for families to get together," he said.

Father Preister, who founded the Family Studies center in 1979, stressed that "parents and parishes need to be partners" in any support activity or program.

"Parishes need to help families do their job rather than trying to do their job for them," he noted.

Three factors should be taken into account in developing any family or parenting program if it is to be effective, said Father Preister. First, parents need to participate in planning the program. Second, there should be a variety of options in the program that meet the needs of different kinds of families. Third, and most important, parents must emphasize the importance of the program at home with their children.

"Drug education programs don't change young people's behavior unless the parents are involved," he noted. Likewise, attendance at a Catholic school will make a difference in a child's moral behavior and belief in Jesus only if "parents and their kids talk about moral behavior at home."

Father Preister added that it is "absolutely foolish to expect a parish to have a program" that meets every possible need. But he believes a parish should "know where services are" so that it can refer parents.

Beyond formal programs and services, there is another dimension in efforts to support families or parents, Father Preister said. It is the concern and interest of parishioners. It might be as simple as listening to a friend or neighbor.

And, he continued, a theology of marriage is needed. Much of what is heard about spirituality is based on a monastic model that does not fit most families, Father Preister said.

"Our models are virgins and martyrs. Very few saints are mothers and wives," he said.

Father Preister insisted that "when you're changing a kid's diaper, you're clothing the naked. When he's screaming and you feed him, you're feeding the hungry. There's a holiness involved" in the trials and joys of parenting.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)



The coming trials and joys.

Family life in the Old Testament

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

What was family life like in Old Testament times?

For centuries family life in Israel was regulated by a fixed, rigid code. It reflected the general culture of the times, which was strongly patriarchal. The father wielded unquestioned authority and assumed ultimate responsibility. This was understandable in an age when physical prowess determined success and security.

Inevitably such a system produced its share of unfeeling authoritarians. In the main, however, families enjoyed peace and happiness. Family members respected and loved each other.

The wife's value was seen primarily in her fruitfulness,

especially in giving birth to sons. Sons made up the work force in an unmechanized agricultural society, and they assured defense against outside interference.

But the wife was loved as a person in her own right, even if she happened to be sterile. There is a moving scripture passage where Elcanah consoles his wife, Hannah, disconsolate over her inability to give him a son.

"Her husband Elcahah used to ask her: 'Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you refuse to eat? Why do you grieve? Am I not more to you than 10 sons?'" (1 Samuel 1:8)

So precious was the love of a mother for her children that Isaiah compared it to God's love for his people: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for

the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

And so esteemed was the love of man and wife that the prophets did not hesitate to use it as a figure for the love which united God to Israel: "I will espouse you to me forever; I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:21-22).

Parents bore responsibility for the wise and prudent rearing of their children. And it is important to note that discipline flowed from genuine love. Fathers loved their sons, who loved them in return. David's grief at the death of Absalom is heart-wrenching: "My son Absalom! Absalom! My son, my son!" (2 Samuel 19:5).

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By David G
NC News Ser

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