

Single parents face

•Learning to cope with children alone. At a time when one's ego is likely to be at a new low, single parents have all the normal problems of child-rearing. Somehow they have to dredge up from within themselves the strength to deal with children alone day in and day out.

Even in a mediocre marriage, husband and wife can turn to each other for some support at critical points in child rearing.

They can make decisions concerning children together — about discipline, schools, entertainment, allowances.

For single parents, if serious problems arise, perhaps with teenagers testing their limits, child rearing quickly can seem overwhelming.

What does a single parent do if a teen comes in with the smell of liquor on her breath?

What if a son is out with a group the parent doesn't know well and misses his curfew?

•Learning to move beyond guilt. It's easy for divorced people to blame themselves for the breakup of a marriage and for altering their children's lives so drastically.

Guilt, I think, can keep single parents focused on the past, ducking the real work now at hand. A parent then may find it hard to show children how to make the

most of their new situation, to set about making new friends and a new life.

•Learning to trust again. It's a rare single parent who doesn't doubt his or her ability to make judgments sometimes. Yet being able to trust others is a basic premise of Christianity and a necessity for a satisfying life.

If parents can't trust themselves or others, how can they teach children it's safe to trust?

Paulist Father James Young talks of how a young executive named Michael learned to trust again in "Divorcing, Believing, Belonging" (1984, Paulist Press). Father Young is rector of St. Paul's College in Washington, D.C.

First, Michael had to be willing to accept help from others, especially an also-divorced business associate, Father Young said. Then, gradually, friends helped Michael "see that trust in God, trust in others and trust in self were all pieces of the same pie."

An advocate of support groups, Father Young is the founder of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics. "One needs many allies at this difficult time, especially loved ones and good friends," the priest said.

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of the double parent

brighten her lonely life, one son who stood between her and utter desolation. Where could she turn now?

In days when there was no Social Security, no life insurance and certainly no opportunity to go out and get a job, she was at the end of the line. And this stranger tells her not to cry.

But Jesus did more. First he silenced the din of the mourners with a gesture that brought a gasp from the crowd. He stepped forward and touched the litter.

Contact with a corpse brought instant defilement according to the Law. But Jesus, who didn't hesitate to touch lepers — the "living dead" — had no scruples about touching a corpse.

In the ensuing silence, he uttered an incredible command:

"Young man, I bid you get up! The dead man sat up and began to speak. Then Jesus gave him back to his mother."

He "gave him back to his mother": That simple statement speaks volumes in terms of compassion and sensitivity. Perhaps Jesus, himself the son of a widowed mother, was uniquely aware of

what this young man's death meant to this woman and his heart went out to her.

In any event, he did more than take pity on her. He intervened actively, with positive, creative and practical love.

The widow in Luke's narrative might be compared to today's "single parent."

Actually, however, there is no such thing as a single parent. These people are, in fact, double parents. They have to be both mother and father to their children. It is a formidable challenge in many ways, financially, physically and psychologically.

Parenting is difficult even when two parents are in the picture full time. Often single parents are very much alone and need understanding and support. This is true whether they are financially secure or not.

Christians are Christ in space and time. For the Christians today, the story of the compassion shown by Jesus to the widow of Naim is particularly timely.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

FOOD...

...for thought

1. As a newly separated parent bewildered by her husband's unexpected departure, Mary wasn't sure where to turn.

She was involved through her son in the parish's CCD program. Through friendships developed there, she learned about a weekly Eucharist at 5 p.m. in the parish convent, attended by 20 to 40 people.

That Eucharist quickly became "almost the highlight of the week for me," Mary said. "At a vulnerable time in my life, those people became key supports to me and a strong sense of community developed among us." She came to know the people well through the potluck suppers that often followed the Mass.

What made the experience all the more striking, Mary says, was the fact that the group made her feel "so welcome, even though my lifestyle was different." At the time, 14 years ago, separated and divorced people were not as highly visible in her parish.

Later, Mary made it a point to keep an eye out for other lonely and upset people to welcome to the liturgical experience.

2. Each week the 35-year-old woman faithfully attended the parish renewal meeting. Somewhat quiet, she didn't play a major part in the group conversation. When she did speak, however, she was listened to because she could be counted on

to speak honestly and with feeling.

One week participants discussed what they sought in the church. The woman's answer was straightforward: "I look for a sense of community."

Her answer, to at least one listener, was surprising. When he learned later that the woman was a widow with three children, her comments had a "double impact," he said.

Her statement made him think about what his responsibility might be toward the parish. "If community means so much to her," he said, "it seems as though she has a right to expect it."

"If we don't respond to her need, our meetings will be a failure for her," he added.

How can other parishioners help single parents in their midst to feel welcome in the community?

•Keep alert for shy persons sitting by themselves, especially at social events. Think how hard it is to approach a group of people who all seem to know each other.

•Take care when setting rooms up for events. Set up tables and chairs in such a way that single adults and single parents with their children are encouraged to mingle with others.

What suggestions can you add to this list?

...for discussion

1. Father John Castelot suggests that "single parents" is a misnomer; They should be called "double parents." Why does he say that?

2. In planning special events — community dinners, parish celebrations — what can be done so that single adults and one-parent families feel welcome? Can you think of an occasion when, inadvertently, arrangements were made in such a way that single adults would not feel included?

3. Katharine Bird lists some of the special adjustments single parents have to make. What are they?

4. Dominican Father David O'Rourke says that friends and the traditions of the church are supports for single parents. How?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Divorcing, Believing, Belonging" by Paulist Father James Young is a series of reflections peppered with stories from his 10 years of ministering to divorced Catholics. Father Young writes that Christianity and the church's ministries have much to offer people struggling to adjust to the many changes that result from a broken marriage. Father Young says that in his work he has seen "pain, healing and new life over and over again. I have seen the Lord reaching out and touching his people." The book is designed "to follow the process of the divorcing person through the trauma of broken marriage, on to the struggle to believe again and find a new sense of belonging in the Catholic community." (Paulist Press, 387 Massachusetts Blvd., Mahwah, N.J. 07430, 1984, \$7.95.)