

respect
life

FAMILY POLICY

The Catholic Church Offers a Model Worthy of Consideration

By
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On Oct. 22, 1983, the Holy See issued a "Charter on the Rights of the Family." The Charter provides a distinctive standard for assessing our nation's commitment to strong families — a standard which is recognizably Catholic, but based on the dignity of the human person and directed to all people of good will.

Its comprehensiveness compares well with analyses of family policy pursued by adherents of the two major political factions in the United States. Americans, whether liberal or conservative, agree that the family is important, that it deserves government support and protection, and that there is a place for something called "family policy." But the political right is often thought to focus only on issues involving sexual ethics, while the political left is often seen as preoccupied with the morality of economic problems.

The Church rejects such partisan divisions. In the realms of both sexuality and economics, private transactions can have corrosive effects on the stability of the family and hence on society as a whole. Materialism and selfish individualism are threats to the family in both spheres; and in both spheres government policy necessarily plays a significant role in helping or hurting families.

How do we measure up, then if judged by the 12 Articles of the "Charter on the Rights of the Family"? How consistent with these Articles are current government policies, and what are we, the Church in the United States, doing to improve matters.

Each of the Charter's articles is relevant to current debates on family policy. For example, Article 1 upholds "the institutional value of marriage" and urges that "the situation of non-married couples must not be placed on the same level as marriage duly contracted." This principle is under attack in American law, most notably in U.S. Supreme Court rulings on contraception, abortion and parents' rights. Americans also tend to chafe at any recognition of the special role of marriage in society. Yet the tragedy of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases has given Americans a reason to appreciate monogamy on public health grounds alone.

In Article 3 the Holy See recognizes a married couple's "inalienable right to found a family and to decide on the spacing of births and the number of children



The United States is the only developed nation in the world that does not guarantee the jobs of new parents and other workers who must take a leave of absence.

(Photo by Jim Whitmer)

to be born" within the context of sound moral principles. Here the Vatican rejects coercive population programs like that of the People's Republic of China, where a "one-child-per-family" quota has been enforced by the use of involuntary abortion and sterilization. Such practices have moved the United States since 1985 to withhold funds from organizations that support or help manage coercive programs.

Article 4 of the Vatican Charter calls for "special protection and assistance" for children "both before and after birth," as well as for their mothers "during pregnancy and for a reasonable period of time after childbirth." In recent months Catholic organizations have acted on this mandate by opposing Medicaid cuts and by supporting the Medicaid Infant Mortality Amendments of 1987 to improve prenatal and pediatric care.

Recognizing parents' "original, primary and inalienable right" to educate their children, Article 5 states that this right includes educating their children in moral and religious conviction, the right to choose schools that can assist in this task "without incurring unjust burdens," and the right to ensure that their children are "not com-

pelled to attend classes which are not in agreement with their own moral and religious convictions." In particular, parents have a right to supervise sex education directed at their children, and to demand that "the means of social communication" should "reinforce the fundamental values of the family.

Article 6 calls on public authorities to "respect and foster the dignity, lawful independence, privacy, integrity, and stability of every family," and to assist the "extended family system" to fulfill its role of solidarity and mutual assistance."

Article 9 of the Charter calls on governments to help provide for the special needs of families when their members become ill or disabled. The proposed Family and Medical Leave Act of 1987 addresses these concerns by requiring large employers to give employees a leave of absence when necessary for family reasons. This legislation seems modest when one considers that the United States is the only developed country in the world that does not guarantee the jobs of new parents and other workers that have good reason for a leave of absence.

Article 12 calls for efforts to keep families together during migration.

This is one of several areas in which federal regulations and policies designed to implement the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 are seriously deficient.

In the Church's view, a consistent plan for the defense of the human life must embrace a consistent effort in defense of the family. As Pope John Paul II noted in *Familiaris Consortio*, all human life passes by way of the family. It is in the family that most of us gain our first understanding of the dignity of human life, for it is the place where we are loved and accepted not for what we can do or provide but simply because we are.

Whether the specific issue is abortion, pornography, unemployment, fair housing, or immigration, the Church's vision as summarized in the Charter on the Rights of the Family promotes a unified witness to the need for strong and stable families. As Pope John Paul II has said, the family "is necessary not only for the private good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation and state."

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