

# Church vision of marriage uplifts family values

By Bishop James T. McHugh

As we approach the year 2000, the family is certainly different than it was in 1950.

American couples are marrying at a later age. One might think that higher age at marriage would mean more marital stability, but the U.S. has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Some demographers estimate that almost one-half of recent marriages will end in divorce.

While churches and religious institutions seem more tolerant of divorce, the incidence of divorce is lower among couples of the same faith and among those with a higher degree of religiosity.

Since the 1960s the U.S. birthrate has steadily declined to its present level of 1.8 children per family — less than the 2.1 children necessary to maintain population stability. Couples are delaying their first child and putting greater space between births.

The result is smaller families, and in many cases no children at all. At the same time, social values that once gave status to infants and children and directed the organization of social life in support of motherhood and parenting have fallen out of favor.

One of the major philosophical antagonists to the family is the popular conception of individualism. Not all traditions of individualism are objectionable of course. But our national institutions have become more secularist, our juridical and legal institutions seem unable or unwilling to strike a balance between the common good and individual rights, and our cultural traditions giving special status to the family as the primary social institution have eroded.

If the story ended here the outlook would indeed be bleak. But the ideologies are being questioned, if not generally challenged, and there are efforts underway to restore a more value-oriented approach to marriage and family life.

Ultimately, it is the adjustment that husband and wife must make to preserve mutuality and intimacy that is really the challenge. Marriage is, after all, a relationship based on love and intimacy. It grows and develops as a couple learns to communicate and work out the responsibilities of married life.

The church's teaching on marriage and family life is rich and compatible with many of the progressive movements in society. A Catholic vision of marriage and family life includes:

- The cohesive quality of the marriage relationship is conjugal love, a love that implies maturity, freedom, and an ability to sacrifice. The only place in which this is realized is marriage.
- Marriage and conjugal love create an openness to childbearing and childrearing. There is an inherent connection between conjugal love and parenting,



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which in the Christian tradition has always placed a high value on the child.

- Understanding the link between intimacy and childbearing demands respect for sexuality and for the integrity of sexual intercourse as both love-giving and life-giving.
- Christian marriage is a unique and special path to holiness. The commitment to and pursuit of holiness enables couples to transcend failure, to reconcile with God and each other, to regasp their values and to practice virtue.

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model based on the principle of stewardship which considers individuals as they relate to God and other persons. We are called to "love our neighbors even as we love ourselves." But how can Christians promote Gospel values in a secular society? Theologian Walter Kasper suggests a model in which individuals view one another not as limitations to personal freedom but as the ground and goal of freedom (Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, p.p. 202-204). He uses as an example social contracts, such as the U.S. Constitution.

Persons formulating any social contract realize that in order for any individual to exercise a right in society, the actions of all must be limited in some way. If there existed no agreed-upon limits and all were free to act as they wished, there would be no true freedom, only chaos.

Individuals remedy this by drafting social contracts which contain limits. Within this context, those limits actually secure freedom, thus maintaining the rightful balance between autonomy and the common good.

Together we can work for solutions that maximize the patient's dignity with full recognition that the way we treat the patient — humanly or inhumanly — both reflects and constitutes society.

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