

WORLD & NATION

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Jennifer Reed/CNS

Resurrecting Catholic schools

Students attend class at Marian Academy in Georgetown, the Guyana capital. The school opened in 1998 through an initiative of Roman Union Ursuline Nuns. It is part of an effort to re-establish Catholic schools in the country, which for decades had only a government-run education system.

Cohabitation scrutinized in new church document

By John Norton
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a detailed document on cohabitation, the Vatican said the unique legal status of marriage and the family must be defended as indispensable goods for society.

Far from being merely traditional models, the document said marriage and the family express the most fundamental truths about human love and social relations — a truth it said Christian families are called to make apparent with their lives.

The 77-page document, "Family, Marriage and 'De Facto' Unions," was released at the Vatican Nov. 21.

It was prepared by the Pontifical Council for the Family after consultations with family experts from around the world, said Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, the council's head.

Cardinal Lopez Trujillo said he hoped the document's reflections would be useful to lawmakers and to church leaders, as well as in generating a wider social dialogue about the essential value of the traditional family to society.

The document analyzes different forms and possible causes of cohabitation, lays out a series of arguments for favoring the family based on marriage over "de facto unions," and examines the roots of Christian marriage.

While married and cohabiting couples claim to base their relationship on love, it said, only the love of married people has been transformed by a personal and public commitment.

"It does not seem reasonable to hold that the vital functions of family communities, whose nucleus is the stable and monogamous institution of marriage, can be carried out in a large-scale, stable and permanent way by merely emotional forms of cohabitation," it said.

The document's main thrust, repeatedly stated throughout and summarized in the conclusion, is: "The family is a necessary and indispensable good for the whole of society, and it has a real and proper right in justice to be recognized, protected and promoted by the whole of society."

It said insisting on unique rights for marriage and the family "does not mean presuming to impose a given behavior 'model' on the whole of society, but rather the social need for recognition, by the legal system, of the indispensable contribution of the family based on marriage to the

common good."

The church's opposition to "de facto" unions often might seem, it acknowledged, "merely defensive, thus giving the impression that the church only wants to maintain the status quo, as if the family based on marriage were simply the cultural model (a 'traditional' model) of the church that it wants to keep, despite the great transformation in our era."

To combat this appearance, more must be done to highlight the positive aspects of married love, it said, especially through the witness of married couples and families. It said:

"To the disillusioned men and women who ask themselves cynically, 'Can anything good come from the human heart?', it is necessary to be able to answer them: 'Come and see our marriage, our family.'"

The document called on politicians to not only oppose efforts to give other types of personal unions "marriage rights," but to work for "the energetic and systematic promotion of organic family policies, which consider the family based on marriage as the center and motor of social policy."

Lawmakers, especially Catholics, had a "grave responsibility" to oppose efforts to give so-called same-sex unions juridical recognition, it said.

The document said that greater care must be taken within the Catholic community to prepare couples for marriage. Marriage preparation cannot simply be information about what marriage is for the church, it said. "It has to be a real path of personal formation based on education in the faith and education in virtues."

It said pastors must take into account "human fragility" and individual reasons when they are assessing specific cases of cohabiting couples, but "understanding circumstances and respect for persons are not equivalent to a justification." One option for the pastor is to seek to regularize the couple's union, the document said.

In conjunction with the cohabitation document, the family council released an eight-page statement of conclusions from its Oct. 11-13 congress at the Vatican on the theme, "Children: Springtime of Family and Society." The conclusions underscored the importance, especially in regard to children and society's future, of legislative protections for the marriage and the family.

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