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Joseph L. Lennon

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Social Eyes and Family Mindedness

JOSEPH L. LENNON, O.P.

Pope Leo XIII, famous for his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and a staunch champion of social justice, stated more than 15 years ago: "The family may be regarded as the cradle of civil society and it is in great measure within the circle of family life that the destiny of the state is fostered." This statement is as true today as the moment it was first uttered. And Leo insists further that a just society creates a normal, natural family environment. If it does not, then social injustice is present and something should be done about it. This, by the way, is a major objective of the war on poverty. It is based on the proposition that the family life of so many children in slums and the rural poor simply cripples them for living — physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

Enlightened self-interest alone would dictate that the social defense of our country is as important as the military defense; that the social development of our people must keep pace with our economic development. Children who are denied the satisfaction of basic needs in wholesome family life, who are unwanted and rejected, become a source of unrest and may lash out at those who deny them opportunities to satisfy these needs. The well being of society suffers thereby. The production of a better society depends largely on the production of better parents. This calls

for much needed parent education and also demands education for parenthood. Yet the community, the churches and the schools have tended to evade or avoid the responsibility in this matter. Marriage preparation programs and post-marital counseling have not been directed to the people who need it most.

It is a truism that good families produce good citizens. Why? Because responsibility is the keynote of citizenship. This can be best learned in the home where children are taught that there can be no privilege without a corresponding responsibility. If parents themselves are irresponsible, then their example will speak louder than any words, and the church and school have no machinery adequate to undo parental mistakes. To promote good citizenship, therefore, an educational program is needed which will accustom children to accept reasonable responsibility from infancy onward. The father and mother are the first and most effective teachers in training for this responsibility.

Zimmerman and Cervantes in their study "Successful American Families" point out that in an era of widespread social disorganization and social change most American families have found a way to preserve themselves, protect their children from destructive influences, and perpetuate sound patterns of family living. They do this by more

or less consciously controlling the family friendships and keeping their youngsters' most frequent and intimate contacts limited to families having values and customs similar to their own — similarity being measured by resemblances in religion, education, economic status and the like. By being selective, parents create a home environment in which children can grow up without being too greatly exposed to different values and conflicting practices. Children may know that other people think and act differently in the world, but not in *their* world. Their own family values have had a chance to take root and grow. Incidentally, Jewish and Chinese families have been particularly successful in this matter.

This restriction of closest association to a group that has as much as possible in common, has enabled these families, which, by the way, constitute something like eighty-five percent of the population, to avoid broken homes, to keep high the level of aspiration, to prevent juvenile delinquency among their offspring, and to promote the education of children so that nearly all of them finish high school and a continually larger proportion go on to college.

Most of the social difficulties and problems which the nation faces are created by the remaining fifteen percent of the population which is characterized by a high proportion of broken homes, much juvenile delinquency, indiscriminate friendships and inadequate education of their young people.

Unfortunately, this fifteen percent, by virtue of the publicity given to it and the trouble and expense it causes to the community, gets most of the attention, much more than its share of public and private funds, and because of the over-importance which it thus acquires, has misled observers into believing that family life in America is disintegrating.

Actually, if we are to believe Zimmerman and Cervantes, good families are getting better and bad families are getting worse. This means that welfare costs will rise because bad parents have children who, in turn, become bad parents. As our divorce rate increases, as separations, desertions and abandonments increase, there will be more children who will become somebody else's responsibility. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the very rich and the very poor have the most difficulty in rearing children successfully. These two classes, for instance, provide much more than their quota of juvenile delinquency. The lower income brackets have greater difficulties both because of their slum environment and the lack of control of their children due to the absence of working mothers and the inadequacy of fathers. The high-income brackets have exceptional difficulty because of the lack of control of their children through their own out-of-the-home activities and their children's unregulated use of automobiles.

And so, our immediate problem is to strengthen weak families, for

the home is crucial in shaping personality and consequently in laying the foundations for later life. This is not to subscribe to the theory that childhood experiences explain all adult behavior. Perhaps psychologists have overstressed the importance of early life. It may well be that the individual instead of being a product of his childhood is a result of what adolescence, youth and adulthood have done to his childhood experiences. Nevertheless, few would dispute that, to a great degree, the psychological direction of the tree of adult personality depends on the way parents bend the twigs of budding personality.

As Americans, we like to believe that there are many important values inherent in our way of life. For instance, we believe in the worth of the individual and in national progress. We believe in universal literacy and education as the means of solving social and personal problems. We nourish the thought that if everyone were able to read and write and go to school, then everything might turn out all right. We have confidence in man's ability to control and direct his destiny, in both a personal and a social sense. How does the child learn these ideas and values? He learns them in only one way: through the family. But note this: these ideas and values are colored by his family experience. The child sees the American way of life through the eyes of his family; he learns of it through the words his family uses and he shares the

family's feelings toward it. The values, yes, and the disvalues of our democratic society are transmitted in a family version, compounded out of what the family can see of the so-called American way of life, how it sees it, and how it wants to see it.

The result of this selective and evaluating process on the part of the family is the formation of the child's sense of values in regard to both personal pursuits and ambitions and social behavior. It is within the bosom of the family that judgments are formed, conflicts of value are resolved, and choices are made, or at least influenced. Life, as we know it, is varied and complex, infinitely full of possibilities. Personality development is a constant series of choices. These choices are made according to a person's scale of values, and modern scholarship concludes that these values are, in large part, the result of family living.

Striking statistical confirmation of this fact is found in the study by Hartshorne and May of the sources from which children derive their ethical concepts. The study clearly showed that there was a significant correspondence between the moral judgments of the child and those of the parents. Incidentally, the judgments of the child were found to be more closely allied to those of the mother than of the father.

Further corroboration of this truth is disclosed in McCord's investigation of the *Origins of Crime*.

He discovered that the real factors producing a criminal personality are not found in the character of the housing, in the economic status of the family, or in the child's I.Q. Rather, they are found primarily in the relation of father and mother to each other, their acceptance and love of their children, and their maintenance of firm but kindly discipline. These are the points at which the problem of juvenile delinquency and adult crime must be attacked; and I might add that these are the points so frequently neglected by the community, while it spends great sums on social work of many kinds that come too late to do much good. The root of criminal behavior lies in the family, and all the work of social agencies will be merely stopgap unless they work *with* and *in* and *through* the family. We have to go further than our family courts have been able to reach.

This has special implication for the anti-poverty war we are now waging. Sociologists tell us that poverty can be inherited. How? Insofar as the disvalues connected with poverty are transmitted by parents to children to children's children. Poverty leaves an indelible mark. It curses children with a paucity or lack of incentive, of motivation, of goal aspiration, and of training in other social skills required to make the fullest use of the resources—educational, vocational, cultural, and social—resources that lead to exits from poverty. As a result of the parent's social, educational and economic

poverty, children are left with a weak value system, inadequate role models and a deprecating self-image reinforced by cultural deprivation—all of which complement and support a person's inability to achieve and improve his lot. So it is, in this sense, a passing down of an inheritance of poverty, materially, socially, culturally, and oftentimes, spiritually.

One of the greatest goods parents can confer upon a child is to provide him with an adequate scale of values, a philosophy of life, certain standards and principles which give direction and purpose to life and serve as a basis upon which he can take a stand to work out a solution to the problems of daily living. It is a family's philosophy of life which helps it to meet adversity without going to smash, that enables it to be brave and steadfast when the going gets tough, that equips the child to make the business of living synonymous with the joy of living. In short, it gives meaning to life and is a vital element in the psychic atmosphere which envelops the child as he grows.

Money is needed to destroy the devastating effects of poverty on family life. Destitute families should have sufficient income to maintain a decent standard of living. But these families usually have problems that money alone cannot cure. More than money is needed to help persons caught in the grip of poverty. We need to instill in them a sense of self-respect, an esteem for their individual worth,

a conviction that they are not victims of impersonal forces but, with the help of God's grace, can meet adversity and control their future. We must educate them to see that they are not merely formed by and react to their environment, but in a very real measure they create their environment. We need to put incentives into public welfare programs so that people will want to help themselves, will see the benefits of working full or part time, will begin to realize that they can pull themselves up by the boot straps. We need to plan a strategy that rewards personal effort and initiative and roots out an attitude of hopelessness, despair and powerlessness. As Pope Paul states in his encyclical, *On the Development of Peoples*, "The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word and where the poor man Lazarus can sit down at the same table with the rich man."

As every child matures he asks himself these questions: Who am I? What am I? What is my particular relation to this society in which I find myself? What is my peculiar place in it? What is my status?

These questions arise early and are insistent. Parents may sense them before children develop to the

point of formulating them. Social workers recognize the craving of adopted and foster children to learn about their parents — who they were, what sort of people they were — regardless of how they were treated by them. Newspapers often contain stories of grown persons seeking knowledge of parents they never knew. The study of genealogy is a very human and understandable quest.

Status has been defined as position in society, the standing accorded the individual by his fellows, one's place on a prestige scale. One of the most important things which a family does for the child is to give him status. The family does this by means of two things. First of all, it gives him a name and secondly, it gives him a social position. Without a name a child is a nobody. Nobody likes to be a "nobody." Everybody likes to be a "somebody." By virtue of his family, by virtue of his family name, a person becomes a somebody—that is, an individual with status.

Family names, then, are important. Names quickly identify the child as a member of a particular group, and since these groups are apt to have a distinctive status the child is assigned that status. This is the basis of what is known as "family pride." Persons of minority nationality groups, for instance, learn through experience, that certain names awaken certain prejudices. Every year millions of people change their names. They feel that a new or false name is

an effective mask for disguising themselves, and that if they discard their names, in some way, they discard a part of their personality.

Moreover, this factor of family status is related closely to the concept of security. To feel safe means to feel at home—providing our own experience at home gave us a feeling of affectionate security. The emotionally mature person is one who feels at home in the world at large. The person who has never learned to feel at home in his childhood home is apt to have trouble in his later years. Home-sweet-home is the child's first psychological laboratory. It is there that the child first learns about other people and about himself, and this is likely to color his subsequent interpretations of human nature. His eventual thoughts on the meaning of marriage and how one ought to bring up children, on the place of a father in the home, on the role of the mother, may be given shape and substance by what he notices in his own home. This is an obvious truth tragically overlooked by tyrannical fathers, shrewish wives, overindulgent parents, jealous husbands and selfish mothers.

But this is also important: family name and status also have a great deal to do with a person's behavior through their effect upon the conception of one's self. How one thinks of one's self determines how he reacts to other people. William James used to remark that a man had as many selves as there were persons who recognized him

and carried an image of him in their minds. The poet Masefield writes:

And there were three men went
down the road
As down the road went he
The man they saw, the man he was
And the man he wanted to be.

This is where the Church can be most effective in developing in each person a proper self-respect. The individual is priceless in the sight of God. He has status in God's eyes. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, would have become man for him alone, would have suffered and died for him alone. The person who realizes this understands that he has status regardless of what his fellowman may think.

It is a consciousness of this dignity that the churches must try to inculcate. It is this kind of support the churches must give. It means educating people to use their potential to develop as individuals, as human beings. The lesson contained in the parable of the talents should be taken to heart by everyone: What is important is not what one has but what one does with what one has.

The Church is traditionally described as a family. Indeed, she is referred to as "Holy Mother Church." Families are vital to her existence. Unfortunately, while clergymen today find themselves increasingly embroiled in family problems they find themselves increasingly helpless to suggest solutions to them. Here is an area that cries out for clerical education.

In spite of all the study on marriage and the family, nobody has yet found the way really to strengthen family life. No one can specify with micrometric exactitude the conditions in which children should be reared. Nevertheless, there is already plenty of information on which to make a start, and if we are going to make an effort to strengthen family life in the United States, then we must, first of all, get the facts.

Let us get the facts about the needs of families, about efforts to meet them, about social and economic practices that depress families and perpetuate the dependency of parents. Let us document these facts and perhaps use them as the basis of a fruitful hypothesis. What is the condition of family life in each community? Do the fathers and mothers in a particular locality represent the same national culture? Are child-rearing practices typically American, or are they American Portuguese or American French Canadian, or American Italian? What is the difference between a young man born and reared of Sicilian parents in an Italian Ghetto, and a young man who is the offspring of Jewish parents in the affluent section of the city? How does immigrant status effect family life? What are the handicaps of Negro families? How effectively do Polish and Italian families adapt to American conditions? What effect does all this have on the stability of family life? We

need to gather the facts about families if we hope to improve their condition.

Because strong families are so essential for a strong nation we should mobilize public opinion. We should strive to make all citizens family-minded. Every person in the community who exerts an influence on the family, no matter how small, must use this influence to strengthen family life. The teacher in the school, the policeman on the corner, the grocer in his store, the social worker, the judge, the lawyer, the physician, the pharmacist—all must be conscious of the tremendously vital role that the family plays in the progress of our community. They must develop "social eyes" to sense the forces threatening wholesome family life, and do everything they can to foster greater family unity.

Social welfare means: "I am my brother's keeper." This entails social responsibility. This responsibility increases with our increased ability to predict long term consequences of environmental forces and developmental characteristics. If the home, the school and society do not adequately meet these responsibilities, society will suffer in the long run and our democratic way of life will be weakened.

[Father Lennon is dean of Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island. He delivered the foregoing discourse before the Governor's Family Life Conference in Rhode Island.]