

Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 28-29, 2019

Readings: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Col. 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

On the Feast of Holy Family, our thoughts naturally turn towards the dignity of family life. As our Gospel relates today, threats against the family are nothing new. The courage of Joseph spared the Holy Family, paving the way for their new home at Nazareth, as foretold by the prophets. The threat then from Herod was tangible. Today it is more subtle, but no less real. Incremental change has been occurring for more than a generation, altering the very landscape of the family. And we must respond to these changes with both faith and trust.

A new Pew Center research survey is as troubling as it was surprising. This is a non-partisan research center that is well respected. We know that the reality of single parent households has been steadily on the rise in the United States. In 1980, 78% of all children were living in a family with two parents. Today that number has dipped to 65%. But I never considered how we compared to other nations. This study covered 130 nations. Guess which one had the highest rate of children living in single-parent households? The answer—right here in the United States!

“Almost a quarter of U.S. children under the age of 18 live with one parent and no other adults (a total of 23%), more than three times the share of children around the world who do so (7%).”¹ It is a far cry from Leave it to Beaver. By contrast, in China only 3% of children live in single-parent households, though it is far likelier for multi-generational families to live under the same roof in some parts of the world. But still, the difference is significant.

At the outset, let me be clear that all families deserve our support and encouragement. I have truly been edified by some incredible single-parent families whom I have known in my thirty years of ministry. It is not an exaggeration to say that some of them are truly heroic.

¹ “Religion and Living Arrangements Around the World,” Pew Research Center, December 12, 2019

Their situation is often due to circumstances over which one parent has little or even no control. At the same time, we must objectively look at the effects of these trends in the broader sense. Not surprisingly, single parents bear significantly more responsibility, given the inability to share the responsibilities. It puts much greater pressure upon one individual. The vast majority would prefer a different arrangement, and yet do their very best to live faithfully in the moment.

“The word ‘economics’ comes from the Greek word (*oikonomia*) that means ‘management of the household.’”² Children growing up in families with both parents have markedly higher rates of high school graduation. “Data from the Census Bureau shows that child poverty rates for children in single mother households were more than five times the rate for children in married-couple households.”³

These reflections are not primarily about economics or single parenthood; they go much deeper. We need to reclaim the dignity of marriage itself amongst our young people because to many of them are afraid of it. Marriage is good both for society and more importantly, it is good for the life of the soul. Just half of all U.S. adults today are married, down 8% just since 1990. The figure stood at 72% of all adults in 1960.

What is happening? True, people first marry on average at an older age and that surely accounts for some of the change. But it most certainly does not account for all of it. Many may be afraid because of what they observed about marriage growing up. There is a fear of commitment, as evidenced by how often people change jobs. We must do all in our power to encourage our young adults to seek marriage in the Church. Too many see this as irrelevant in their lives, as they opt simply for a civil marriage, or in some cases no marriage at all, choosing cohabitation instead.

² Marriage and Our Economy, “First Things First. www.firstthings.org/marriage-and-our-economy

³ Forbes Magazine, November 19, 2014. Read at the website of American Enterprise Institute: www.aei.org/articles/biggest-reason-income-inequality-single-parenthood/

Many are searching and longing for meaning and yet they miss what is right before their eyes. It falls to you and me to help them see the radical difference that the person of Jesus makes in our lives and the radical difference he can make in their relationships.

We must neither give up hope nor give in to societal pressures to change the fundamental meaning and nature of the human family. Talk to your children or grandchildren about marriage and its benefits for society. The family remains the fundamental building block of the Church. The Second Vatican Council rightfully called the family the domestic church.⁴

May the season of Christmas give us hope and may the grace of God come upon all families, whatever their circumstances. May they know the saving power of the Lord.

⁴ Vatican Council II, “Lumen Gentium, no. 11: “The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.”