

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 41

The family, the vital cell of society 2

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Importance of the family for society

“The family, the natural community in which human social nature is experienced, makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the good of society. The family unit, in fact, is born from the communion of persons. ‘Communion has to do with the personal relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘thou’. ‘Community’ on the other hand transcends this framework and moves towards a ‘society’, a ‘we’. The family, as a community of persons, is thus the first human ‘society’ (*Gratissimam San*).”

“A society built on a family scale is the best guarantee against drifting off course into individualism or collectivism, because within the family the person is always at the centre of attention as an end and never as a means. It is patently clear that the good of persons and the proper functioning of society are closely connected ‘with the healthy state of conjugal and family life’ (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Without families that are strong in their communion and stable in their commitment peoples grow weak. In the family, moral values are taught starting from the very first years of life, the spiritual heritage of the religious community and the cultural legacy of the nation are transmitted. In the family one learns social responsibility and solidarity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).”

“The priority of the family over society and over the State must be affirmed. The family in fact, at least in its procreative function, is the condition itself for their existence. With regard to other functions that benefit each of its members, it proceeds in importance and value the functions that society and the State are called to perform (*Charter of the Rights of the Family, Preamble*). The family possesses inviolable rights and finds its legitimisation in human nature and not in being recognised by the State. The family, then, does not exist for society or the State, but society and the State exist for the family.”

“Every social model that intends to serve the good of man must not overlook the centrality and social responsibility of the family. In their relationship to the family, society and the State are seriously obligated to observe the principle of subsidiarity. In virtue of this principle, public authorities may not take away from the family tasks which it can accomplish well by itself or in free association with other families; on the other hand, these same authorities have the duty to sustain the family, ensuring that it has all the assistance that it needs to fulfil properly its responsibilities (*Familiaris Consortio*).”

The key messages today are:

The family is the cornerstone of society; it forms the basic unit of social organisation; it is difficult to imagine how human society could function without it.

The family makes a significant contribution to each individual by providing an environment where he/she can learn to receive and give love and develop the self-confidence to become a productive member of society, contributing to its advancement. For children and teenagers, the family is essential to providing the socialisation that is required to function successfully in the world. Even for adults, once socialised the person must remain emotionally stable, the family provides the environment to counterweight the stresses of everyday life, and we all know how stressful life today can be.

The evidence produced by today's society of the effect of the breakdown of the family is the prevalence of street children, homeless persons, drug abuse, poverty and crime. Individuals who lack the support of the family turn elsewhere; and when these individuals become dysfunctional the society degenerates. When the family is broken, the individual suffers and so does the society.

What follows, is that the State and other institutions now have to take over family functions. Therefore as Christians we must ensure that the society and state exist for the family, by promoting family life programmes in our Church, by encouraging the State and other institutions to promote the environment to support and not destroy family life, and by our own behaviour ensuring that what we do builds our families and not breaks them down. Next week we will deal with "*Marriage, the Foundation of the Family*".