

Questions About Family Life

Questions addressed to a Catholic Priest. From “Radio Replies”.

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Family life.

What does your Church hold to be the principal duties of the family?

In general, the duty of all the members of the family is to cooperate for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the whole domestic group. Besides showing love and tenderness and devotedness towards each other, parents are obliged to provide for their children's present temporal needs of food, clothing and shelter, and see that they receive a Christian education, training them in Christian virtue both by word and example, and prepare as far as possible for their future settlement in life. Children, in turn, owe to their parents love, gratitude, respect and obedience. The Catholic Church puts before her members the Holy Family at Nazareth as an example, urging parents and children to cultivate the spirit that prevailed between Jesus, Mary and Joseph; and to try to be equally faithful to God in their respective duties.

What do Catholics hold to be the relative positions of the members of the family?

The father is the head of the family and has authority over domestic discipline. His authority must be exercised, of course, in a reasonable way and in accordance with the law of God. Whilst the wife is subject to her husband, she is not a slave but a companion. The father should rule by love rather than by tyranny, and the wife should gladly cooperate. Children are subject to both parents, older ones sharing in the authority of the parents over younger ones to the extent sanctioned by the parent.

So you still maintain the old-fashioned doctrine that the father is the head of the family?

However old-fashioned you may think the doctrine, it is still valid both by the natural moral law and the revealed law of God, And the Catholic Church has no choice but to insist upon it, regardless of the secularized philosophy of an irreligious world.

How is he supposed to behave in this capacity?

Certainly not as a bullying despot. Nor should he think of domestic discipline in terms of military discipline. He won't do that, of course if he really loves his wife and children, as he is bound to love them by the very law of God. Any authority he has, even where he has to insist upon the observance of his decisions, must be exercised in a spirit of Christian prudence, charity and patience.

In what particular things is he the head?

It is impossible to answer that question adequately here; for I cannot go through all possible details of family life that could be involved. In general, the husband has the right to decide the place of

domicile, to supervise economic matters and secure domestic discipline. But in a normal Christian family, this is a theoretical rather than a practical question. Husband and wife make the home, and it is for them to arrange between them the details of domestic life.

In what particular things is the wife subject to her husband?

I can do no more with that than with your preceding question. In general, the wife is obliged to respect her husband's authority in all matters that do not conflict with the law of God, and to teach her children to do the same. If she does not do that, she undermines all parental authority – including her own. But if she really loves her husband, no great difficulty will arise in this matter.

Is the teaching of the Catholic Church stricter in this matter than that of other Churches?

In general, I would say yes. The Catholic Church will never depart from the teaching of Saint Paul: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as the service of the Lord demands; and you, husbands, treat your wives lovingly, and not harshly. Children, obey your parents in all things; for this is well-pleasing to the Lord." So Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians 3:18-20. Outside the Catholic Church there are more and more concessions to what is called the "emancipation of women," and to the idea that parents should treat children as equals, letting them express their precious little personalities in any way they please!

Does your Catholic teaching get results?

Catholic principles are not, of course, equally put into practice in all Catholic homes. But where they are put into practice, it is certain that the greater conformity to the will of God results in greater blessing from God upon the whole family. Where right order instead of anarchy prevails there is a greater spirit of unity and less discord than would otherwise be. No one can deny that family life is more stable and secure where Catholic principles are observed than where they are abandoned. And homes broken up, whether by civil divorce or by separations are undoubtedly more numerous amongst non-Catholics than amongst Catholics.

Do you hold that domestic happiness depends on the woman sitting back altogether and making all the self-sacrifice?

No. Husband and wife are partners, even though the husband be "chairman of directors;" and the happiness of the home depends on mutual love and mutual self-sacrifice.

What hold has the Catholic woman over her husband?

From the merely natural point of view, the same as any other woman – her ability to retain his love and loyalty. From the religious point of view, she has an advantage in the fact that the Catholic religion declares that marriage is binding until death, and really means it. The Catholic couple sets out on the road of married life with the certainty that henceforth it is the only road; and they are much more likely to make the best of things when difficulties arise than other people who think it quite lawful to change partners whenever the one they have seems less attractive to them. Above all, if a Catholic husband is fervent in the practice of his religion, regularly approaching the Sacraments, his own conscience will be a guarantee of his fidelity far more effective than any other.

What would the Catholic Church regard as the main cause of family discord?

The main thing, generally speaking, would be the loss of fervor in the fulfillment of religious duties. If people do not make much of peace and union with God, then peace and union amongst

themselves is not likely to survive. There is a lot in the slogan adopted by Father Peyton: "The family that prays together stays together." The second thing that is most likely to destroy peace in the home can be reduced to one word, although it has a thousand applications, is – selfishness.

What is the Catholic recipe for family happiness?

That follows from what I have already said. Let both husband and wife see to it that they and their children are fervent in the practice of their religion, not only publicly by attendance at Mass and the reception of the Sacraments, but by due provision for religious reading and family prayers in the home. And let them both try to set the example and train their children in unselfishness. There are many adjustments of personal habits, interests and preferences, which have to be made by husbands and wives if they wish to have harmony in the home. If these are made with unfailing sympathy and deep understanding, a reasonable amount of peace and happiness is possible.

What advice is generally given to Catholic husbands and wives?

Such advice should rather be sought from a marriage-guidance bureau than from a radio program like mine. However, I would say this to husbands. They sin gravely before God if they put any hindrance in the way of their wives and children as regards the fulfillment of their religious duties; if they ill-treat their family whether by physical violence, or by bad temper, abuse or drunkenness so as to cause them great sorrow and unhappiness. It goes without saying, of course, that husbands, not only by adultery but by any alienation of their affections from their wives to other women, gravely offends God and do a great injustice to their wives. Also, they seriously neglect their duties if they are miserly, making niggardly or quite insufficient provision for the temporal needs of wife and children; or if they are spendthrifts and gamblers, dissipating possessions which should be used to improve family conditions and provide for the future of their children. As for wives, they also sin by notable disobedience to the serious will of a husband when his demands are quite reasonable and not opposed to any law of God; by provoking their husbands to anger whether by words or actions; by neglecting the home, leaving it untidy and filthy and being careless about the preparation of meals; by omitting the religious instruction of the children, or encouraging their disrespect for their father; and so on, with all a wife's reciprocal duties to her husband corresponding with his to her.

Sir Charles Blackburn, a leading medical specialist, said that the types of young men recruited for World War II had shown him that an enormous number of children would have turned out much better men had they been better looked after.

There is no reason to doubt that statement; and it naturally suggests measures for the better physical and moral training of children.

He said that his own feeling was that the State should frankly accept the position of guardian of the child.

That proposition would be acceptable only within certain definite limits. For whilst the State has the general duty to see to the welfare of all its citizens, it has not the right to supersede the rights of parents. The family, as the fundamental social unit, comes before the State, which is built up from the association of families. People become part of civil society through the family in which they are born. The family finds its immediate foundation in human nature itself. It is not a group owing its origin to human invention like a trade-union, or a friendly society, or a golf-club. It is a God-appointed society, with rights prior to any rights of civil society, rights it cannot alienate and which the State is not entitled to violate. The State cannot abolish the rights of parents nor usurp them. But

the rights of parents do not include the right to neglect their duties. And if they do so, the State has the right to step in to safeguard the rights of the children, compelling parents to fulfill their duties and even if necessary supplying for their deficiencies.

Dr. Blackburn said that the State should follow up the children in their homes, and if they were neglected should act, even to the extent of taking the children away from their parents.

Not all children should be followed up in their homes. Ordinary citizens should not have their homes invaded and be compelled to parade their children for inspection where there is no reason to suspect that the children are not being properly cared for. Surely, it can be assumed that parents are not neglecting their children, rather than that they are neglecting them. Where there are good reasons to suspect that parents are willfully neglecting the welfare of their children, or are incapable of looking after them properly, then, the State should intervene and compel the parents to do their duty, or even make other provision for the children if parents either refuse or are incapable of discharging their obligations.

Sir Charles Blackburn said that he had been in Soviet Russia and had seen for himself how children there are the charge of the State, which recognized that they were its future citizens and took the responsibility of looking after them - as parents in our country did not.

It is too sweeping to say that parents in our country do not face up to the responsibility of looking after their children. Some may not; but the majority do. Does Sir Charles Blackburn want us to adopt the totalitarian principles that all children are the property of the State and that State rights are superior to those of parents themselves! We object to the regimentation of children, with a State-prescribed formation forced upon them throughout their childhood. The State must recognize, not only that the children are its future citizens, but also that they belong primarily to their parents. And we insist that the State recognize the dignity, the rights and the liberty of those parents in reference to their own children.

He said that Soviet Russian children cared for by the State seemed to him to be a healthy lot, and far more of them would be fit for military service than in our country.

Although no one would wish to deny that physical health is a great good, it is not the supreme good to the exclusion of all other considerations. Human beings are not mere animals whose worth is measured by physical condition. Nor is the number of those fit for military service an indication of the true well-being of any nation. If the health of our children in general needs improving, ways and means can surely be found for that without sacrificing our personal and family liberties, exchanging them for a form of totalitarianism and subservience to an Absolute State. There is no need, and it would be a violation of their rights, to deprive parents of their children and entrust them throughout their childhood to the care of State-appointed officials. Such an absolute monopoly of the upbringing of the children on the part of the State would mean a most reprehensible destruction of family life. Catholics would be compelled to resist it by all lawful means.

Does not the Catholic Church try to keep women confined to the limitations of the home as far as possible?

You speak as if for you home is a kind of prison! When the Catholic Church tries to vindicate the privileges of home and family life for women, you regard that as doing them an injury. You do not see that the dignity of woman is at its highest in the home over which she presides; that she is truest to her own nature when she finds a never-failing and constantly increasing interest and delight in

the upbringing of her children; and that the family, in which parents and children can dwell together, provides one of the happiest conditions in which human beings can live. Remember that the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself, chose to be a member of a home for thirty years out of His thirty-three years on earth, offering to Christians the example of a family life refined, elevated and sanctified, as a holy and happy institution in which the best of life can be found. Or do our standards so differ that this is all a foreign language to you?

Women in Soviet Russia are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, cultural, social and political life.

The one thing Soviet Russia cannot do is to turn them into men. And it is no gain to women in the long run to have all the spheres open to men thrown open to them also at the price of abandoning their own womanly sphere. Men and women were meant to complete each other's lives, not compete with each other in one and the same field. If women demand equal rights with men, intending the same rights as men, they are their own greatest enemies. The real equality they should seek is full freedom to be women, as men are free to be men; each sex safeguarding its own proper dignity and fulfilling its own proper destiny.

Soviet women have their right to work safeguarded, full payment for work, maternity leave with pay, and the provision of a wide network of State maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens.

So that is your idea of heaven on earth for women! They may join the ranks of wage-slaves. The husband's protection of mother and children will be superseded by that of the State. Mother will even be allowed to cease work for sufficient time to have each baby; and State officials will provide all the loving care upon the babies in nurseries that their mothers are too busy to spare! When I think of my own childhood and of my own mother, I am very glad she was not a Soviet female worker.

What better deal does the Catholic teaching offer to women than Communism has given them in real fact?

A normal life in keeping with the aspirations of normal women. And the normal woman doesn't want a home which is merely the sleeping place for a number of independent wage-earners; she doesn't want her maternal duties taken over by the State; she doesn't want children who know their parents as "the man and woman who come for the week-ends," as Bertrand Russell put it. In other words, the normal woman does not regard marriage and motherhood, and the loving duties of the little world that is her own home, as the sacrifice of her independence and the abandoning of her career. Marriage, home and motherhood constitute her career, rendering her independent of factory and shop, and opening up to her a wider life than any elsewhere. The woman who does not think in such a way is not normal, but abnormal.

Does not the Catholic Church look upon sex-union as an evil and sinful thing in itself, which at best can be excused by a marriage ceremony?

No. The Catholic Church teaches that the sex-functions, when used in accordance with conditions prescribed by the law of God, are good, holy and meritorious before Him. Because it is forbidden by the law of God, sex-indulgence outside marriage is sinful. And God forbids this because sex-union is intended by Him for the procreation of children, the due protection and proper upbringing of whom require that their parents are united in the permanent state of marriage. Hence the law that the privileges and duties of parenthood may belong only to those who have permanently contracted

to dwell together within the state of marriage. Marriage is not, therefore, an "excuse" for indulging in what is sinful in itself. It is the God-appointed state in which the sex-union is good and lawful, but outside of which such conduct is a violation of God's will.

Do Catholics regard marriage as a God-given vocation?

Not in the particular sense in which we speak of a vocation to the Priesthood or to life in a Religious Community. That is because marriage is a normal and natural state to which people are drawn by ordinary human inclinations. The consecrated life of celibacy is not normal and natural; and the desire to adopt it presupposes special religious aspirations, which are usually regarded as a sign of a special vocation. However, there is a sense in which Catholics who are naturally drawn to marriage can and should bring into their natural inclinations an element of supernatural and divine vocation. The foundation of this is to be found in the fact that for them the natural institution of marriage has been lifted by Christ to a religious and spiritual level. He constituted it as one of the Sacraments; that is, as a supernatural means of grace and divine life to the souls of the contracting parties. Catholics who enter upon marriage from natural inclination certainly have a vocation from God to make theirs a truly Christian marriage.

How can there be a vocation to an inferior state in life?

A normal state in life as intended by God cannot be called an inferior state in life. Marriage is the normal state for men and women, since their sex-differentiation is obviously ordained to it. A vocation to celibacy, whether as a Priest or in Religious Life, may be to a higher state in life from the viewpoint of the spiritual reasons inspiring it. But this is necessarily an exceptional vocation. Nor does it imply that those called in such a way surpass in holiness by the very fact those who marry. Saint Augustine taught his Nuns to say: "The state of virginity is better than marriage. But I am not better than married women because of that. The life I live, many a married woman would have lived better had it been her duty. The duties they fulfill, they do much better than I should have done had they been mine." Positively, Catholics who are married should try to realize that they play a most important part in the Church, and that they will attain to great holiness by fulfilling the duties of their state, as they should. It is a high vocation, in a very true sense, to cooperate with God in the work of creation by providing little children for Christ to sanctify, making possible their eternal happiness for them. It is a high vocation to found a truly Christian family, which will give edification by its Christian virtues in the midst of an irreligious and undisciplined world.

Do Catholics look upon marriage in that light?

Good Catholics do. For them marriage is much more of a vocation than a mere form of recreation in which one seeks primarily one's own pleasure and natural satisfaction. Duty and the service of God come first. The parties realize that theirs will not be a truly Christian marriage if Christ be not in it; and their aim is that the love of husband for wife, and of wife for husband, and of both for their children must be caught up into and blended with the love of Christ for them all.

Most sermons on marriage heard in Catholic Churches tend to make one think the married state if anything undesirable.

It is unfortunate that such an impression should be given. But the difficulty is that we Catholics are a minority dwelling in the midst of a majority to whom our views on marriage and its responsibilities are not acceptable. Publicity is constantly being given to attacks on the marriage-bond, divorce has become socially respectable, contraceptive practices are openly advocated,

obligations of married people are treated lightly, and priests when speaking on marriage cannot escape the duty of denouncing and warning Catholics against such degradations of matrimony. In addition to that, the dangers of mixed marriages have always to be stressed, not with any hope of preventing them, for they will always be with us, but at least to make Catholics realize and brace themselves against such dangers if they do contemplate marriage with one not of their own religion. As I have said, it is a pity that marriage has so often to be dealt with in such a way instead of in a more positive, encouraging and inspiring way. But there is the more glorious view of marriage, all the same.

What did Paul mean when he said of marriage: "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church"? (Ephesians 5:32.)

Where your Protestant Bible has "This is a great mystery," the Catholic Douay Version has "This is a great sacrament." To translate the Greek word for "mystery" the Latin Bible used the word "sacramentum" which meant something having a secret or hidden meaning. Saint Paul is not saying that marriage was a mysterious thing in itself. Nor was he directly referring to it as a "Sacrament" in the Catholic sense of the word. He was rather stressing the importance marriage should have in the eyes of Christians because of its deep significance as reflecting the union between Christ and His Church. Nevertheless, as a profound religious reality in Christianity it does rank as one of the Sacraments in the Catholic sense of the word; that is, just as Baptism, or the Holy Eucharist or Sacred Orders rank as Sacraments instituted by Christ Himself. He particularly blessed marriage by His presence at the marriage feast at Cana; He made its unity and absolute indissolubility part of the New Law as opposed to the laxity of the Old Law; and Saint Paul tells us that it has great spiritual significance for Christians as reflecting the union between Christ and the Church. The Catholic Church has defined, therefore, that matrimony between baptized Christians is one of the seven Sacraments instituted by Christ, and a source of special graces to the contracting parties.
