

BECOMING A FAMILY AND BUILDING THE FUTURE



A WORLD WITHOUT CHILDREN?

P.D. James' novel and recent movie, *The Children of Men*, portrays a world without children as a world without a future. Universal infertility has created a barren landscape: all the playgrounds have been dismantled; buildings are left to ruin; pets and dolls are treated like children. People have lost interest in the arts, religion, relationships, long-term commitments and responsibilities. Moods fluctuate between anger and despair.

Although this is a work of fiction, P.D. James' novel gives us cause to reflect seriously upon the effects of declining fertility rates. In Japan deaths already exceed births and toy makers are designing new baby-like dolls with a vocabulary of 1200 phrases, not for the young, but for the lonely and the elderly. Even in Australia, our fertility rate is well below the level required to replace each generation.



“A CHILD NEEDS LOVING ATTENTION. THIS MEANS THAT WE MUST GIVE CHILDREN SOME OF OUR TIME, THE TIME OF OUR LIFE...” POPE BENEDICT XVI

SAYING ‘YES’ TO CHILDREN

Pope Benedict says that declining birth rates are the result of multiple and complex economic, social and cultural causes, but that their ultimate roots are “...moral and spiritual; they are linked to a disturbing deficit of faith, hope and, indeed, love.” He understands that we may be doubtful whether we can surrender our time to someone else; uncertain about our ability to bring up children; or insecure about the future and whether it is a good thing to bring children into the world. Yet the decision to “entrust to others the gift of life and the task of an unknown future”, both requires and enables faith, hope and love.

To have time and give time to children teaches us to **love**. By transmitting life we express a **hope** that is stronger than any clouds that obscure the future. The foundations for life can be found, and passed on, in the certainty of **faith**.

Children help their parents to grow as persons. They draw parents beyond their own immediate needs and wants and encourage them to more carefully reflect on the kind of community in

which they live and in which their children will grow up. Children also cause parents to strive to emulate virtues such as patience, courage and kindness which they hope to nurture in their own sons and daughters.

Men and women can say ‘yes’ to children. “In this very way human freedom is brought about and thus the sacred context of marriage is also created and enlarged, becoming a family and building the future.” This decision almost certainly brings many challenges. Reflecting on his time at the World Meeting of Families in Valencia, Pope Benedict honoured married couples who say ‘yes’ to children and “accept the trials that this entails: social and financial problems, as well as worries and struggles, day after day; the dedication required to give children access to the path towards the future”. Ultimately, however, it is a decision which is as ‘life giving’ for parents as it is for their children.

“There are always so many different things happening. When I am away I miss this the most. Each brother and sister is their own person and we all live in a great environment where we are helping to shape one another”

Jessica, 20



WHY IS IT LIKE TO BELONG TO A LARGE FAMILY?

“Although we can sometimes wake up and find that there are four or five others in the bed with us, it is really great fun having lots of children – all with their own personalities. Meal times are the best times. Each child has their own gifts, talents and bad habits to work on. But within all the ups and downs it’s a great way to live a life. There is an old Italian proverb that says that with each child God gives you an extra loaf of bread. We have found that when things become difficult, trust in God becomes important. He always finds a way to look after us.”

Mary Clare, mother of nine



EXERCISING RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

The work of having a family is one of enormous privilege and responsibility in which husbands and wives become ‘pro-creators’ with God, the source of all life. That is why the Church has always held that those who enter into marriage must be open to new life. Such a disposition is of enormous spiritual value both for the married couple and for their capacity to provide a generous welcome to any children of their union.

The Church also pastorally cautions us to be aware of the immorality of contraception. The effect of contraception is a withholding of the gift of fertility from one’s spouse. Because contraception is directly opposed to the transmission of life, it falsifies the self-sacrificing love proper to marriage. It does this

by “altering its value of total self-giving” and contradicting God’s design of love. (Familiaris Consortio, n. 32)

In contrast to contraception, natural methods of regulating fertility enable couples to postpone the reception of the gift of a child without engaging in an act of sexual intimacy that deliberately rejects the gift of life. As John Paul II explained, responsible procreation happens when a “family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely.” (The Gospel of Life, n. 97)

“You never get lonely!”
Bernadette, 11

CHILDREN: GIFTS OR PROJECTS?

Sadly, an acceptance of the goodness of children does not always go hand in hand with an acceptance of the goodness of every child. Our newfound ability to control human generation with ever greater precision comes with the risk of undermining one of the distinguishing features of parenthood and family life: the promise and hope of unconditional acceptance.

Whilst there are differences in the moral nature and degree of gravity associated with acts of abortion, contraception, some uses of reproductive technology, the creation of ‘designer’ children, embryo screening and destructive embryo research, they are essentially all fruit of the same tree. (c.f. Evangelium Vitae n.13)

This is a tree affected by a rot which prevents us from understanding the wonderful intrinsic goodness

of every child. This tree bears a bitter fruit. It yields a way of thinking which regards the child as a commodity with little or no inherent worth. Rather, a child’s worth is largely contingent on his health, as determined by others; the extent to which he is wanted by others; and his degree of usefulness to others.

One of the great changes in the old Graeco-Roman world as a result of the spread of Christianity was the virtual elimination of state sanctioned abortion and infanticide. These were rejected as people came to see that every child is a ‘gift from above’ made in the image and likeness of God. **Children are not something to be rejected or abandoned or possessed. Each child is someone to be received, nurtured and loved.** A child is a gift, a blessing, a sign of a loving Creator intimately connected with a flourishing family life. This understanding of children as gifts has sustained and nurtured the growth of Western society for the past two millennia.

“There are lots of people around that you can palm off jobs to!”
Brigid, 16

PROMOTING ALTERNATIVES TO ABORTION

The day that a woman receives a positive pregnancy test should be one of the happiest days of her life. Sadly, for some women this day marks the beginning of a period of intense fear and anxiety as they face questions such as: how will I cope without the support of my child’s father?; how can we afford another baby?; what will my parents, my school friends, my parish think of me? Tragically, one in four pregnancies in Australia ends in abortion.

Women facing a difficult or unplanned pregnancy need love and practical help, not judgment and abandonment. They also need information, time and support to pursue life-giving alternatives to abortion. Abortion is never an authentic solution to these women’s immediate problems: it is an illusory solution with devastating effects for a mother and her child.

What can we do to ensure that every pregnant woman

and unborn child is welcomed and honoured in our families, schools, parishes, workplaces and communities?

“I guess everyone wants the best for their children and I was no exception. It seemed that having me as its mother would be a pretty poor deal and I hurt at the thought of my child having a father who wanted her aborted. I doubted that I would cope emotionally, physically or financially. These factors seemed to stack up and suggest a difficult future for the child and for me. It didn’t dawn on me that the only thing abortion offered my child was death. And I had no idea that life after abortion would be so hard for me....”

Abortion is sold to women as the great solution. I thought I was going to have a minor surgical procedure which would solve a major problem. Instead it unleashed a host of problems for me. My abortion experience has, I believe, predisposed me to a lifelong vulnerability and fragility that I would not otherwise have had. Even the happiest events of my life are now shadowed by a secret sadness. Retrospectively, none of these problems seem insurmountable. But that’s not how I imagined them at the time.” Catherine ii



“The big people are always around to get stuff down for me.”
Thomas, 5

MAKING GOOD DECISIONS ABOUT PRENATAL TESTING



Today, parents have access to a wide range of screening and diagnostic tests to gain information about the health and progress of their unborn child. This information can sometimes be used to improve or benefit the health of the mother/foetus by enabling earlier and more effective therapy. Often, however, tests provide information about the likelihood or existence of illness or disability in the foetal child for which no treatments are available. Such tests are usually performed to give parents the option of terminating the pregnancy.

Because every child is worthy of life, acceptance and love, we should never act on the judgment that a child is better off dead than alive. It is wrong to undertake prenatal testing with a view to the abortion of any disabled or seriously ill unborn child. We never show mercy or love toward disabled children by killing them. We show them mercy and love by giving them the chance to be born, held and loved, grow and achieve as much as they are able.

Some parents refuse to undertake any testing of this type, preferring to foster an attitude of unconditional acceptance. Others, while clearly against abortion, take the view that information from prenatal testing might help them better prepare to welcome a sick or disabled child. Such couples should be aware, however, that some of these tests (e.g. chorionic

villus sampling and amniocentesis) carry a significant risk of miscarriage.

Expecting parents should ask their doctor or midwife: Can the test results be used to help the mother or the unborn child? Does the testing pose any risk to the pregnancy?

"For us there was never any question of abortion. It may sound strange, but I didn't even think of it because to me he was already our son. I had already felt him moving inside me for months. He was our child – as deserving of our love and protection as any of our other children. Abortion was just not an option we thought of for Andrew. Sadly, we learned from our doctor that of four Downs Syndrome babies diagnosed in utero in the same month as Andrew, we were the only couple proceeding with the pregnancy.

...Perhaps the most important thing to be gained from Andrew's life is that in the midst of shocking suffering, you can find joy and purpose in the tiniest and weakest amongst us. And from their brave hearts we learn a bit more about how to live, order our priorities, and value what is really important in life."

Julia Anderson, reflecting on the life and death of her son, Andrew, aged 6 months. iii

- i. Benedict XVI, Message to members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Apr 28, 2006; Address to the Roman Curia, Dec 22, 2006
- ii. MelindaTankard Reist. Giving Sorrow Words. Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2000, p.94.
- iii. MelindaTankard Reist. Defiant Birth. Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2006, p.133,143.

Further information on:

Natural family planning

www.woomb.org | www.acnfp.com.au

Alternatives to abortion

www.pregnancysupport.com.au

Prenatal testing

www.benotafraid.net

Alternative to IVF

www.fertilitycare.com.au

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