

## Keeping the Family: Coping with the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Atty. Celso C. Talaba Ph. D.  
Vice President, FFWPU / PHILIPPINES

### I. Introduction

The anticipation of the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is fraught with mixed emotions of excitement and uncertainty, fear and resignation. Humankind, on the one hand, is caught in the midst of a blinding speed of scientific progress especially in the area of information technology. On the other hand, we are witnessing social instability and institutional obsolescence eroding our society and threatening to tear families, communities, and ethnic groups apart, as well as the spread of drugs and prevalence of criminality in a society whose members are alienated from the state and from one another. A recent issue of the *Time Magazine* (November 08, 1999) which carries with it the cover story, *Beyond 2000* Questions for the new Century explores the different possibilities such as: Will we need to have sex? What will happen to alternative medicine? Can I live to be 125? When will we cure cancer? What new things are going to kill me? Can I grow a new brain? Can I replace my body? Will Malthus be right? How hot will it get? Can we make garbage disappear? Will there be any wilderness left? Will we still eat meat? All these questions address scientific development and breakthroughs which have underscored man's seemingly unlimited potential to discover and create. For all these fascinating possibilities, there remains the social institution, which has to be examined and strengthened if we are to sustain and enjoy the fruits of scientific progress.

Sociologists believe that the family is the first social institution developed by man. This belief is based largely on anthropological

and archeological evidences such as burial remains, cave drawings, and other evidences left by man indicating the presence of some form of family patterns. All other social institutions grew out of the family institutional complex.

The function of the family in primitive society, like economic production, the distribution and consumption of goods, the maintenance of law and order and the training and education of the young, were formalized into institutions charged with specific responsibilities. The family is the basic social institution, from which the others have grown as increasing cultural complexity made them necessary.

The family, then, is the overarching institution, which impacts upon all other social institutions. Toffler calls the family as the giant shock absorber of society the place to which the bruised and battered individual returns after doing battle with the world, the one stable point in an increasingly fluxfilled environment. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds, the giant shock absorber will come in for some shocks of its own. The search for truth, whether scientific or philosophical, takes place in a cultural context. This is because one unconsciously absorbs many social and political values peculiar to his time, place and class and these values tend to indirectly color our ideas.

From this perspective of our search for truth or visioning of the future the family as the overarching institution from which all other institutions germinate comes to the fore. It only takes a little stretch of the imagination to understand the connection between the family, social institutions and the corresponding zeitgeist of the future.

### I. Family at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Especially in the latter half of this century the distinctive structure and moral ethos of the family was challenged as never before. Major demographic and normative shifts have occurred not only in the ways we live, work, and consume but also in the ways in which we understand ourselves and our relationship to the family. While the vast majority of ordinary men and women continue to profess their loyalty to the principles of the conventional family, the paradoxical effects of these shifts have left many without a script for conducting their private and public lives.

Demographically the conventional family has become smaller in size and significantly less stable. Gender roles have become considerably more flexible both inside and outside the home. As an

institution, the family has received substantial competition from not-so-conventional forms of living together. These have been profound shifts in sexual behavior, with the consequence that it has become socially acceptable to construct one's own preferred domestic arrangement, ranging from single-parent households, blended families, same-sex couples, and cohabitation to arrangements so fleeting that they defy description.

On the normative level, a change in attitudes and behaviors is most visibly expressed in the greater societal emphasis on the needs and wants of the individual and an increased desire for personal autonomy and personal freedom. Along with the increased emphasis on the equality of the sexes has come the blurring of such genderspecific roles as the mother and father. There has also been a weakening of traditional norms guiding marriage and the organization of the household.

The contemporary zeitgeist, carried forward by ideas of freedom and equality, seems to have left behind the possibility of a family based on the voluntary curtailment of personal interests and freedom. Visions of a life unencumbered by obligations and the humdrum requirements of daily family life have introduced an enormous amount of discord into marriages. The limiting function of the conventional family radicalized the feminist movement and provoked the ire of those highly educated middle-class women who feared that a sense of commitment to family might harm their liberalization agenda.

### III. Sex Without Love / Commitment

Intriguing is the question whether we still need to have sex in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Matt Ridley will still be trying to get each other into bed in 2025 but it will be more for recreation than procreation. Many human beings will be using test tubes not just to get around infertility and the lack of suitable partners, but to clone themselves and tinker with their genes. In fact, since the birth of the first test tube baby Louise Brown, in 1978, in the US alone, some 100,000 test tube babies have been born in laboratories rather than in bedrooms. And if human cloning becomes possible and few doubt that it will be feasible to clone a person by 2025, even the link between sex organs and reproduction will be broken.

Ridley adds that, in a sense, we have already divorced sex from

reproduction. The contraceptive pill freed women to enjoy sex for its own sake. Since many people born from in vitro techniques are themselves infertile because they inherit the infertility of their genetic parents, infertility is bound to increase and with it the demand from in vitro fertilization. This and the demand from gay couples and from those with personal eugenic motives such as not wanting to pass an inherited disease or wanting taller or prettier children and sexless reproduction is bound to spread.

### IV. More Fatherless Homes?

A few years ago, US News and World Report went back to teacher surveys in the 1940s and discovered that the most serious public school disciplinary problems then in their order of importance were: talking out of turn, gum chewing, making noise, running in the halls, cutting into lines, improper dress and littering.

In the 1990s, a similar teacher survey recorded the most serious problems to be: drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault not to mention the recent spate of school murders and homicides during one of the greatest expansions of expenditures on education at all levels in the history of America and perhaps the world. Societal shift had its effects outside of school as well. Teenage suicide rates have gone from 3.6 per 100,000 in the 1960s to 11.3 in the 1990s. Robert Royal opined a factor that may explain a good portion of these phenomenon is that 70 percent of juveniles in long-term corrective facilities grew up in homes without fathers.

Illegitimacy, school dropout rates, young women in poverty as heads of households, violent crimes and drug use by undisciplined youths all mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating pathologies have become the most nationally pressing social problems.

Seen as major problems in America in the year 2000 are the following:

- ① 40% of all American births are expected to occur out of wedlock
  - ② Suicide rate will be triple that in the 1960s
  - ③ About 20% of teenage girls will have at least one abortion by age 20
- Family breakdown is probably the area most Americans now agree poses the greatest threat to public life.

With a divorce rate of around 50% and illegitimacy rates of 30% most children now come into the world with a handicap unprecedented in any culture on earth at any period of human history: no stable family to speak of.

## V. Alternative Lifestyles

The impact of new birth technology will be the single most upsetting force to strike the family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By 2025, we will be able to pre-set the sex of babies, or even program its IQ, the ability to swallow a pill and guarantee oneself twins or triplets or even more the ability to actually produce embryos all these will have dire consequences in ones capacity for love, commitment, trust and child rearing. If babies can be grown in a laboratory jar, what happens to the very notion of maternity? Weitzer states that the cycle of birth fulfills for most women a major creative need. Most women are proud of their abilities to bear children.

If so, what would happen to the cult of motherhood, Weitzer asks, if her offspring might literally not be hers, but that of a genetically superior woman, implanted in her womb from another womb or even grown in a Petri dish? Not only motherhood, but the concept of parenting / parenthood itself may be in for a radical revision. The day may soon come when it is possible for a child to have more than two biological parents. For example, when a woman bears in her uterus an embryo conceived in another womans womb, who is the mother? And just exactly who is the father? This and the other complications arising from this development will have its serious ethical and moral questions we have to confront.

Toffler suggests that with super-industrialism, the next stage of economic development, requires, even higher mobility. The tendency would be to postpone children or to even remain childless thus cutting the family down to its most elemental components, a man and a woman. Two people with matched careers will prove more efficient at navigating through educational and social straits, through job changes and geographic locations, than ordinary child-cluttered family.

## VI. The Brighter Prospects

Despite what Toffler said that the nuclear family will only be one of the options in the Third Wave revolution, and despite half a century waiting for predictions of the familys demise to come true, we can see that the family persists, though modified. Despite the countercultures rejection of the conventional family and its moral ethos, most people

have stayed loyal to its ideals. In fact, in America, there exists indirect signs like the conservative shift in wisdom about the effects of divorce on children that the divorce rate is likely to drop. Family advocates argue that the family, having existed all this time will continue to exist. In fact, some go so far as to argue that the family is in for a Golden Age. As leisure spreads they theorize, families will spend more time together and will derive satisfaction from joint activity.

Another view holds that the very turbulence of tomorrow will drive people deeper into their families. According to this view, the family serves as ones portable roots, anchoring one against the storm of change. In short, the more transient and novel the environment, the more important the family will become.

In other words, neither the pressures coming from a rapidly changing economy nor the messages from radical critics advocating radical new lifestyles, seem to have destroyed the ideal of a family-centered life. In structure and style, todays families resemble the nuclear family of yesterday to an amazing degree. In an age when neither tradition nor economic necessity forces people to marry or lead a conventional life, most have not abandoned marriage and the more or less conventional family lifestyle that has accompanied it. We have not lost our capacity for love, trust, and commitment nor have we abandoned the family that stood at the cradle of civilization.

## VII. Conclusion

For all the clamor to reclaim or reconstruct the family, this must begin with the recognition that familial ties are essential to attain the minimal bedrock of social existence. According to Elshtein, human capacities could not exist without a familial mode and that for human beings to flourish, a particular ideal of the family is necessary, knowing that no family is ever perfect.

All have a stake in the future of the family. We all depend on decent, competent people in our society. If such people no longer arise among us because the family continues to be torn apart everyone pays the price. That is why the future of the family should be the concern of all peoples.

Our task, therefore, is to lay down the basis or discover the ideology that will help strengthen the family as the immovable and enduring signpost of the future because if we surrender the family, we will

find, one terrible day, that we no longer have a society or world worth saving.

### Bibliography

- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_ *Beyond 2000: Questions for the Next Century*. Time, November 8, 1999.
- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_ *Embryonic Ethics*. Insight, August 16, 1999.
- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_ *Saving Our Children*. The World & I, July 1995
- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_ *The Future of the Family?* The World & I, December 1995.
- ▶ Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. Bantam Books: New York 1990.
- ▶ Toffler, Alvin. *Powershift*. Bantam Books: New York 1991.
- ▶ Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy*. Image Books 1966.

## SESSION IV

### A Vision for a New Society

Chairman : Atty. Celso C. Talaba. Ph. D.

#### Presentation:

- Curing World Poverty Through the Democratization of Access to Money and Credit  
*Antonio L. Betancourt L.*
- The Y2K Vision for the Humanity  
*Manuel D. Punzal,*