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FAMILY: The mortar that holds the nation together

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Defining Family

Family has undergone a number of redefinitions recently. Surprisingly, the Oxford Dictionary still defines family as 'a group of two parents and their children living together as a unit' or, as 'a group of people related by blood or marriage.' [1]

The Macquarie Dictionary offers: 'parents and their children, whether dwelling together or not, one's children collectively, any group of persons closely related by blood, as parents, children, uncles, aunts and cousins.[2] It differs from the Oxford in not requiring a family to be living together and it omits grandparents from the list of close relatives.

Our society seeks a more inclusive definition of family to reflect and accommodate what is happening in society – families breaking up and reforming in a variety of forms. However both the Oxford and Macquarie dictionaries still offer the 'nuclear family' of parents and a few children as the standard model. It is still the most common household structure.

However we define family, the data suggest that an increasingly secular way of life is not conducive to family. Changing social attitudes toward marriage and the social expectation upon women to prefer a career is delaying the child-bearing years. It is now normal for children to be in early, after-school and long-day care. These changes combine with the economic pressure of high-cost home ownership to cause a steady and problematic decline in the birth rate, a high incidence of marriage and family breakdown, domestic violence and poor mental health.

Despite huge government expenditure on welfare, the data raise questions about the impact of changing cultural attitudes toward the place of marriage and family in society. In spite of the many problems facing families, the majority of people hopes for stable marital and family life. But we must not leave the fate of the family to government, since family is by its very nature part of the private realm of life. Thankfully there are non-government groups, such as the Church, that work hard to support families. This article seeks to underline and amplify the importance of family and marriage in the Church's work in the world.



Happiness as a measure of social good

There are many functional, happy families in Australia but quite how many is hard to tell. The focus of data collection and government expenditure is more upon supporting individuals and families in circumstances of need. This is an admirable purpose and reflects the importance of caring for our neighbours. It stems from those who have shaped society according to the precepts of faith and a high view of humanitarian values.

It would be wonderful if there were data on families whose members enjoy strong mutual love and respect, great capacity to flourish, achieve resilience and unity.

The statistics reveal challenges facing individuals that are a direct result of problems facing families. Many cases of mental illness, domestic violence, addiction and other challenges often derive from familial dysfunction and make their own impact upon family and community. Anyone with a relative who suffers from a serious physical or mental health condition or who goes through a marriage break-up knows how such problems affect the wider family and wider society, often producing a flood of sorrow.

This article then focuses on the family because we are not a nation of disconnected individuals. We are a nation of families. Even the isolated have some family somewhere. There certainly is an increasing diversity of domestic arrangements, but at the root we still see the biological reality of blood relations - a father and a mother and a range of biological relatives. And as goes the happiness of the family, so goes the happiness of the nation.

The annual World Happiness Report (WHR) provides helpful detail on the happiness of individuals as a measure of the happiness of nations. The special interest of the 2019 report was happiness as influenced by the political process, engagement as a volunteer and as a donor to good causes, and the impact of information technology. It measured happiness in terms of emotional responses through the day – feelings and expressions of happiness or unhappiness – rather than as a reflection of material affluence.

The 2019 report makes it clear that while the level of daily happy responses is fairly constant, the level of unhappy responses is climbing steeply.[3] Professor Jeffrey Sachs observed that "we are in an era of rising tensions and negative emotions and these findings point to underlying challenges that need to be addressed." [4]

Professor Sachs also pointed out how increasing addictions are causing considerable unhappiness and depression in the US: "Addictions come in many forms, from substance abuse to gambling to digital media. The compulsive pursuit of substance abuse and addictive behaviours is causing severe unhappiness. Government, business, and communities should use these indicators to set new policies aimed at overcoming these sources of unhappiness".[5]

The report also documents "the increasing amount of time US adolescents spend interacting with electronic devices, and presents evidence that it may have displaced time once spent on more beneficial activities, (screen time) contributes to increased anxiety and declines in happiness."[6]

What the report does not measure is the impact on families of increasing addictions and anxiety. The assumption is that society is now so atomised that the only unit of interest is the individual. This is clearly not the case. While information technology may mean people are spending more time relating through technology, they are still members of families.

Governments should be concerned about protecting families (not just individuals) from the impact of addictions like gambling, pornography and gaming now so ubiquitous on smart phones and computers.

The importance of the biological family unit

This article emphasizes the biological family because it is the source of our identity at the most basic level – in our DNA.

Our DNA is the most basic material element of our identity and belonging. And yet DNA is almost irrelevant within public conversation about family. There is such an easy transition to approve medical processes like surrogacy and sperm donation as if all that is being donated is genetic material. People who have been conceived in these ways often demonstrate the deep impact of being separated from their biological parents, as documented by Myriam Szejer, a child psychiatrist and Jean-Pierre Winter, a psychoanalyst, in the progressive French journal ***Liberation.***[7] Their study considered the surprisingly high level of abandonment of children who are born through surrogacy arrangements.

Biological connections are also frequently ignored by government policies that grant easy divorce. Parenting expert Dr Justin Coulson quoted research into the impact of divorce and separation on a significant portion of Australian children. In 2009, there were close to 50,000 divorces granted, with nearly 25,000 of those divorces involving children under 18 years of age. With research showing that 50 percent of children still fantasise about their parents reuniting 10 years after separation, the effects of separation and divorce are clearly felt by kids in the short and long term.[8] There is a bond to one's close biological family that warrants a higher value in society and government.

It is understandable why schools and public figures tread carefully and seek to be inclusive when speaking about the family, owing to extreme sensitivity about surrogacy, divorce and other issues. But the more the importance of the biological family is neglected, the harder it will be to recognise its fundamental role to hold the community together.

It is necessary to properly value the biological bond especially for the welfare of children affected by the complex decisions taken by their parents. It is also necessary for families, government and the churches to renew their efforts to strengthen family life, and to be more concerned with encouraging the biological family – not just in the nuclear family sense, but as a multi-generational unit stretching back in time and forward in the future.

The biological family and marriage

A serious consequence of secularisation has been a loss of the meaning and significance of traditional family values in general and marriage in particular. Marriage must be understood not only as a private relationship that secures and stabilizes the wider biological family – the more vulnerable ones such as the children and the aged members in particular – but as fundamental to the wider social good.

Society through its governments has historically recognised marriage as having a special status reflected in laws pertaining to the rights and responsibilities of spouses in relation to each other, their shared property, and their taxation liability. Such recognition had in mind the welfare and prosperity of children. This reflected a recognition that marriage and family life were essential to social cohesion.

But sweeping social changes and the weakening of government policy has eroded the special status of marriage, and granted equal endorsement to cohabiting couples who do not make the deep commitment historically belonging to marriage and family derived from the Christian ideal for society.

For families and society to flourish, couples must commit to a permanent, mutually respectful and exclusive relationship. Cohabiting couples who decline to commit to each other are much less likely to formally commit to each other and are much less likely to make long-term commitments to the wider biological family of their partner, or to invest together financially in home ownership and for the long-term good of successive generations.

Without the commitment provided by marriage, successive generations will have less social and financial capital, a diminished standard of living, and greater reliance on government services such as welfare payments and pensions.

In part the steady decline of home ownership for people under 45 years is a result of a rejection of marriage, with housing stock increasingly designed to cater for non-traditional family structures, and a rejection of multi-generational households.[9]

The family, fathers and good male role models

The role of a stable husband and father in a family cannot be over-stated, especially in a culture in which the different roles of male and female are dismissed or ignored. Once again biology is a powerful witness. It makes clear the profound differences between male and female, mother and father, equal in value but different in functional contribution to parenting.

For a family to flourish, those differences must be celebrated and respected. Children do better with both a mother and a father, ideally married. Men must learn not simply to sire offspring, but to contribute as fathers who are actively and positively engaged. The functional biological family, especially through the ties of marriage, supplies grandfathers, uncles, brothers and cousins who help fathers contribute as they should. While those men can never take the place of a father, they also have an important role to play in cases where children are raised without fathers.

When fatherhood is not understood things can go badly wrong. This is no more starkly revealed than in the case of unplanned pregnancy. Too often the pregnant woman considers abortion because she does not have the support of the man involved in the conception. Worse than a simple lack of support is the coercion which a significant number of men exert in relation to unplanned pregnancy.

Dr Carol Portman, giving testimony in Queensland at a committee inquiring into pregnancy termination made the

following disturbing comment when asked if women who present for an abortion ever reveal coercion: "Sometimes even in the best of circumstances we understand that a person is to a degree being coerced but feel they still need to go ahead because it's their only choice, because otherwise this person will leave them, and their four kids (for example). It's very hard to know what to do in those circumstances so you go ahead with what their choice is, even though to a degree they are being coerced."[10]

Abortion coercion is a logical consequence of the rejection of marriage and of the Christian faith which informed social values pertaining to sexuality. Abortion provider Marie Stopes Australia has reported abundant evidence that various forms of coercion around sex are very prevalent.[11]

Again through rejecting marriage and the Christian faith, the incidence of coercion around sex is exacerbated by pornography which reinforces the idea of sex as pleasure without responsibility for the implications on health or fertility. The porn problem relates to addictions to sex, and to long-term effects on male attitudes to all relationships, especially to women.[12]

Pornography affects a man's inclination and capacity for intimacy required for a committed relationship. This is played out with devastating consequences for families, often leading to children being caught up in pornographic exposure and sexual experimentation.

When the biological family breaks down

The biological family is the very mortar which holds society together and when it breaks down the consequences to society are considerable. So much of welfare addresses the dysfunction of a biological family relationship – domestic violence, mental health care, loss of rights and income due to separation, impact on housing and so much more.

The emotional, psychological and financial impact of family break-down will remain with the family and shape the individuals for the rest of their lives.

Sadly, many children of separated families lose connection with grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and community. They are divorced from them and lose the recognition and acceptance that helped shape their self-confidence and identity. This often leads to unhelpful choices.

The biological family and the nation

One thing that the marriage ceremony (whether formal or informal) should always do is remind the couple and everyone who attends that marriage is not just a private affair for the pleasure and benefit of the couple, but is the most important building block for communities and nations. Married couples receive the best opportunity to bequeath social, spiritual and material capital to their heirs and successors, positioning them for success within the community, and enabling them to contribute to the good of society. Each successive generation is more likely to build upon the strengths endowed by the former generations, when marriage and valuable principles are embraced.

Every child that is born is introduced first to its biological family and then to the wider community including the nation. The birth certificate links it to the parents and to the nation which contribute to identity, detailing name, place of birth, biological parents and gender. The registration obligation respects the nation which provides its protection and all the opportunities and rights of citizenship. Recent moves by state governments to remove necessary reference to the biological gender within birth registration can only fail society as those moves deny vital information about identity.

Christian faith and public policy for families

The Christian Church has been negatively affected by the cultural rejection of marriage and traditional family values. Such rejection has created problems of such large magnitude that government has increasingly found itself attempting to provide more welfare to assist the needy. At the same time, the state's increasing bureaucracy and red-tape has made it harder for churches to provide charitable and welfare services.

Such grandiose pledges that "By 1990 no Australian child will live in poverty" become increasingly unrealistic when Christian wisdom and the value of marriage, fatherhood and family are side-lined.

The Christian Church's long history in family and social care has not always been commendable, especially by current standards. Recent failures have caused a great loss of faith and the Church is yet to recover the trust of the community and its mission to marriages and families. This must not prevent the Church regaining its important role to shape families and society. It must re-engage through repentance, positive changes and accountability.

This is a call to Christian churches to regroup and to recover their role to promote the common good, because without Christian wisdom, functional marriages and vibrant families our society will lose cohesion and more children will suffer.

At the same time, governments must recognise that building capacity in families is the first step towards resolving welfare problems, including the provision of stable employment and the income necessary to pay for basic needs including food, housing, transport, health and education.

When governments and churches promote functional family life, the following benefits accrue:

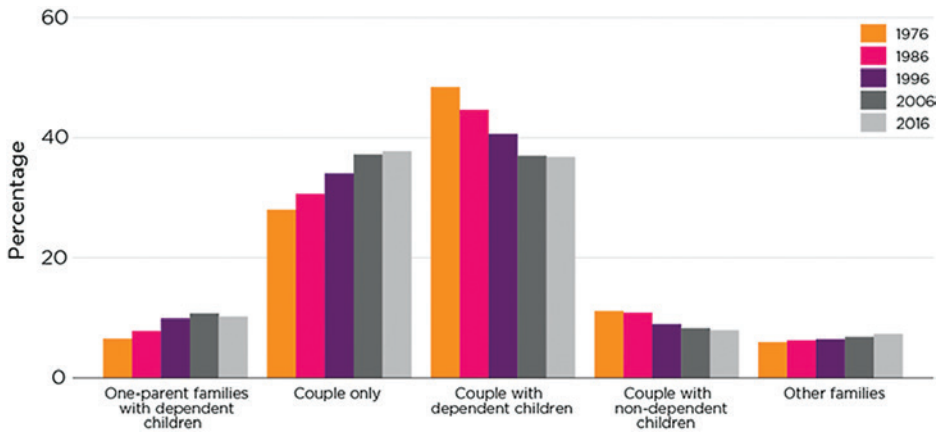
- *Improved education and training:* which will raise the standard of living
- *Better diet and living conditions:* minimizing many problems such as mental disturbance, diabetes and heart disease
- *Enhanced social support:* assisting those facing injury, illness and unemployment
- *Improved extended relationships:* connecting relatives, friends, neighbours, so as to provide a stable social environment for children, including sharing the challenge of parenting
- *Superior long-term social stability:* reducing the need for government and non-government intervention.

The profession of faith does not automatically make a family more functional, but sensible Christian faith and community make a very considerable contribution to a family's quality of life. Being an active part of a vibrant Christian church provides community for all ages and stages of life, including the provision of valuable relationships modelling.

In a time when some say the Church is a major part of the problem, Christians have only one course to take – to rebuild the trust of our communities by reliable and accountable service as the expression of our faith in God who loves the world.

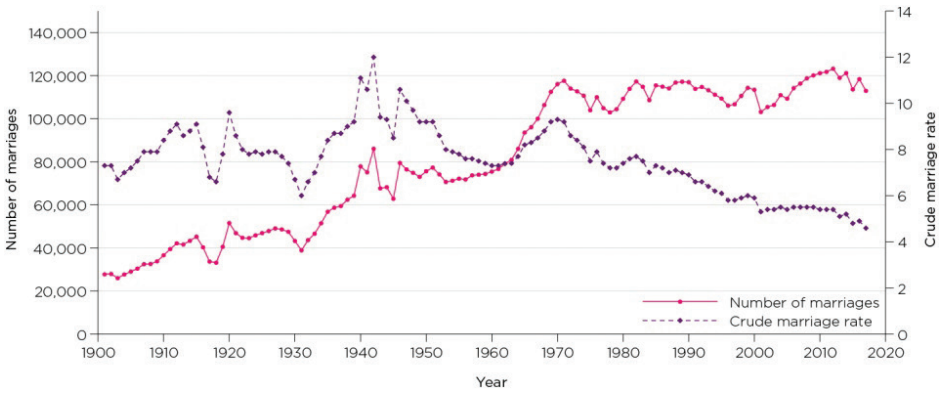
A SNAPSHOT OF FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA

1. **Family types**: There were 6.7 million families registered in 2016 ABS Census. From 1976 to 2016, the proportion of couple families with children at home has been declining. Of all families in 2016, 44% were couples with children, 38% were without children, and 13% were single parent families.[13]
2. **Birth rates:** Births in Australia peaked in 2016 at 311,104. The 2017 figure of 309,142 was only marginally lower; it was the third-highest number of births on record.



Family type, 1976–2016 *Note: 'Other families' include extended families and one-parent families with non-dependent children. Sources: ABS 1976–2016 Censuses*

3. **The fertility rate:** The fertility rate gives the average number of children a woman might have during her lifetime. In 2017 it was 1.74 children - the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) on record, declining from a peak of 3.55 in 1961. This reflects the increase in total national population but the lower fertility rate when comparing 2017 with 1961 when the fertility rate was highest.
4. **Birth replacement rate:** In the 1970s, the fertility rate (number of births per woman over her lifetime) was 3.0 children (declining from peak in 1961 of 3.55) to 1.74 in 2017. The total fertility rate is the average number of children a woman must have to reproduce herself by bearing a daughter who survives to childbearing age.[14] According to the World Health Organisation, this is 2.1 children per woman.[15]
5. **Divorce:** Divorce rates are highest for couples married less than ten years, and for couples aged 25-29 years. Since the spike in 1976 when no fault divorce was introduced, divorce rates have been falling. The crude divorce rate in 2017 was 2.0 per 1000 compared to the crude rate for marriage of 4.6 per 1000 people. In 2017, 49,032 divorces were registered, thus four in every 10 marriages ended in divorce.
6. **Divorce and children:** The proportion of divorces involving children under 18 years has fallen since the 1970s from 68% in 1975 to 47% in 2017. While this is welcome it is better understood in the light of the introduction of no fault divorce in 1976 causing divorce to peak before settling to a lower rate.
7. **Births outside of marriage:** In 1971, 7.4% of births were ex-nuptial, compared with 34.8% in 2017.
8. **Domestic violence:** Family violence refers to violence between family members, typically where the perpetrator exercises power and control over another person, most commonly the partner.[16] The AIHW report referenced states that 1 in 6 women (1 in 16 men) have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner since age 15. Up to one woman per week is killed by domestic violence, and up to one man is killed by domestic violence every 10 days.[17]
9. **Children living in out of home care:** As of 30 June 2017, there were 47,915 Australian children living in out of home care (OOHC). This represented a rise of 18% from 30 June 2013. 17,664 of these were Aboriginal and Torres Straits children, almost 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children.
10. **Child abuse:** In 2015-16, of the total number of notifications (355,935), 164,987 cases (involving 115,024 children) of child abuse were investigated or were in the process of being investigated. Of these investigations, 60,989 cases were substantiated (AIHW, 2017).
11. **Older Australians:** In 2017, approxiamately 3.8 million Australians (15% of the population) were aged 65 and over.[18] Life expectancy for men is 85 years and for women 87 years. By 2057, it is projected there will be 8.8 million older people in Australia (22% of the population). 354,000 people were estimated to have dementia in 2016 and 52% of them lived in permanent aged care facilities.[19]



Australian marriages *and* ***crude marriage rate****, 1901 to 2019 (ABS Census data)*

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