

## SELECT GROUPS

- Topic: Families as Agents in Catholic Public Life  
Convener: Florence Caffrey Bourg, College of Mount St. Joseph  
Presenters: Julie Hanlon Rubio, St. Louis University  
              Florence Caffrey Bourg, College of Mount St. Joseph  
Respondent: Thomas Massaro, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

Families have been called the "first cell of society" and the "domestic church." Yet families are often overlooked in discussion of the Church's public life. When they appear, they are often portrayed as the passive audience or beneficiaries, rather than active agents, of the Church's social mission. This panel began with the premise that theologians must attend to ecclesiology and to social issues at the micro level as well as the macro level.

Dr. Rubio's paper, "The Public Vocation of Christian Parents," examined the relationship between "public" and "private" Christian vocations. In America today, "family first" is a sacred value. Yet what stands out in Christian tradition is suspicion of "idolatry" of family, or concern that it may be difficult to lead a truly Christian life if one stays within traditional family structure. Following the lead of William Spohn's recent book on discipleship, *Go and Do Likewise*, Rubio said Jesus' followers need not mimic his celibacy and single-minded devotion to public work. Still, to "do likewise," Jesus' disciples must have some form of public vocation.

Rubio noted that Catholic theology of work presumes all persons have something important to do through which they benefit the world, realize their selves, and share in God's creative agency. John Paul II acknowledges that parenting contributes to the good of society and is in that sense public work. However, feminist literature, sociological studies, and anecdotal evidence show that many women and men who are committed to parenting nonetheless express the need for work that involves them with persons outside their families. If we conceive of work as a vocation, it is easier to understand why many women and men do not want to give up public work when they become parents. A correct understanding of the public work of parenting should counter the temptation to ignore one's own family in the name of one's professional work or to view family as a private haven rather than a community with a mission that goes beyond itself. We need to further develop practical models of "dual vocation" to family and to the world.

Dr. Bourg's paper, "Cultivating Moral Vision in a Constituency: Family as a Missing Link in Bernardin's Consistent Life Ethic," analyzed Joseph Bernardin's speeches as a recent example of public Catholicism. He was concerned not only about legislation but equally about cultivating moral attitudes in society. He identified many potential leaders of dialogue, teachers, and role models of the life

ethic: bishops, Catholic universities and hospitals, Catholic elected officials, the media. None of Bernardin's speeches or writings on the consistent life ethic describe families as having any such responsibilities!

Bernardin's lack of attention to family or domestic church in this context is symptomatic of the fact that specific lifestyle choices at the household level tend not to be raised in Catholic social ethics. Moreover, ongoing nurturance and moral formation are underdeveloped in relation to both Catholic social ethics and theological treatment of "life issues." Bernardin sometimes said, "Thinking systemically about life issues is not something all are in the habit of doing." Theologians must examine how a consistent habit (or virtue) of respect for life can be cultivated in the first place. The situation of parent(s) with children at home deserves special attention, in order not to cultivate bad habits (vices) which later need to be unlearned. Law is a teacher of virtue, but not sufficient in itself. Also required are practice, imitation of role models, and prudent fraternal correction. Cultivating virtue means habituating the intellect, will, and passions into harmony. Practice, fraternal correction, and role modeling are most likely to have lasting influence if they engage us on a daily basis, among persons with whom we are most physically and emotionally engaged. Examples were provided of ordinary household practices that might have formative influence on the sense of solidarity, willingness to sacrifice and forgive, patience, courage, prudence, and other virtues necessary to sustain a consistent life ethic. For role models we can look to family spirituality literature, Catholic Worker families, even the voluntary simplicity movement.

Dr. Massaro's response was intended to represent specialists in Catholic social ethics. He agreed that while magisterial "proof texts" evidence some attention to families as agents of the Church's social mission, the "micro" level of household and everyday lifestyle choices represents a lacuna in theological reflection. This is ironic, because the household serves as a basic unit of economic theory—their decisions about producing, consuming, and investing steer the macroeconomy. Dr. Massaro proposed questions for future research, such as, "How may parenting and work outside the home be understood as an interrelated response to demands of social justice?"

In remaining discussion time, attention turned to our opportunities as teachers. Many of us have a captive audience of young adults (or older students) in courses such as social justice or marriage and family. How can we introduce the notion of a "social mission" in a marriage course, and lifestyle choices at the household level as affecting social justice? In an ethics course, how can we balance attention to the more familiar legal aspects of "life issues" with attention to formation of attitudes and habits that embody respect for life?

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