

How Does Society Benefit From Strong Marriages?

Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage

The Situation

Recognizing that marriage is the bedrock of society, federal and local governments, civic and community organizations, and religious communities have resolved to offer support for marriage. They recognize that a lack of committed marriages and two-parent families is the root of many of today's social problems, particularly regarding child welfare (Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good: 10 Principles*, www.princetonprinciples.org). The U.S. government established the Healthy Marriage Initiative to support marriages by enabling couples to gain the skills necessary for healthy marriages. (*Healthy Marriage Initiative*, www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage)

Marriages benefit society by building and strengthening human relationships within the home (among spouses and children) and beyond (involving relatives, neighbors, and communities). For this reason, the family has long been understood as the fundamental unit of society, the foundation from which religious, civic, and legal organizations naturally develop and flourish.

Social science findings

The relational ties and community assets forged through marriage result in many positive outcomes for society. Marriage is a "seedbed" of prosocial behavior that fosters social connections, civil and religious involvement, and charitable giving. Marriage connects men and women to the larger community and encourages personal responsibility, family commitment, community voluntarism, and social altruism. (Barbara D. Whitehead, U.S. Senate Testimony, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>)

Marriage is the greatest social educator of children. It is the institution that most effectively teaches the civic virtues of honesty, loyalty, trust, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, and respect for others. The virtues cultivated between men and women in marriage, and between parents and the children, radiate outward into civil society. They deepen in married men and women strong habits of devotion to civic life. (Wilcox, *Sacred Vows, Public Purposes: Religion, the Marriage Movement, & Marriage Policy*, The Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion, p.3,28, 2002, <http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/marriagepolicy.pdf>)

Children raised in intact families are more likely to attend college, are physically and emotionally healthier, are less likely to be physically or sexually abused, less likely to use drugs or alcohol and to commit delinquent behaviors, have a decreased risk of divorcing when they get married, are less likely to become pregnant/impregnate someone as a teenager, and are less likely to be raised in poverty (*Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, Bradford Wilcox, Institute for American Values, www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html).

As of 2004, only 68% of children lived with two married parents (*Family Structure and Children's Living Arrangements*, Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, <http://childstats.gov/amchildren05/pop6.asp>). Children in single-parent families comprise 27% of all American children, yet they account for 62% of all children in families below the poverty line. (*The Positive Effects of Marriage: A Book of Charts*, Patrick Fagan, www.heritage.org)

The negative effects of divorce fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable members of society (Patrick Fagan & Robert Rector, *The Effects of Divorce on America*, *The Heritage Foundation*, 2000, www.heritage.org/Research/Family/BG1373.cfm). Marriage particularly benefits the weakest members of the community. An analysis of recent social statistics concluded that “the preferential option for the poor begins in the home.” (B. Wilcox, *The Facts of Life & Marriage*, Touchstone, Jan/Feb 2005, www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=18-01-038-f)

“Marriage is a wealth generating institution.” The commitment of husband and wife fosters economic specialization and economies of scale (two can live as cheaply as one). The link between divorce/unwed childbirth and child poverty, as well as the rising government expense for welfare programs, testify to the economic benefits of marriage. (Whitehead & Popenoe, *The State of Our Unions 2006*, p.27, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2006.pdf>)

Church teaching and pastoral practice

Vatican Council II regarded the family as the “basis of society” and a “school of human enrichment.” It highlighted the family’s ability to harmonize the rights of the individual with the demands of society (*Gaudium et Spes* #52). The Church sees a resemblance between the unity of the divine persons and the community that people establish among themselves. Human persons need to live in society; societies such as the family are necessary for men and women. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #'s 1878-1896)

John Paul II referred to the family as the domestic church and as a “saved and a saving community.” The family shares in the mission of the Church and manifests to the world the love of Christ for humanity. Marriage forms a communion of persons ordered to society which must also be defended and supported by society. The complementary functions of society and the family indicate that society should respect and foster families, ensuring that they are equipped to fully become what they are. (*Familiaris Consortio*, #'s 45, 49, 70)

The good that the Church and society expect from marriage and the family is so great as to call for full pastoral commitment to this particular area. Marriage and the family must be promoted and defended from every possible misrepresentation of their true nature, since whatever is injurious to them is injurious to society itself. (Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, #29)

The U.S. Bishops stated: “The family exists at the heart of all societies.” It is the first and most basic community where children learn about Christ and experience the joy of communal existence “in the home, in the neighborhood, in the Church, and in society...” (*Follow the Way of Love*, p.1, 32). The Bishops recognized that in order to help children, society must support families. They called on society, as the protector and promoter of children and families, to enter

into creative partnerships with families in order to assist them. (*Putting Children and Families First*, p.2,10)

Conclusion

Marriage is the basis for the family, the fundamental human society. Healthy marriage and family life helps to ensure social stability and improve the quality of life for all members of society. Communities and governments act in their own best interests when they take concrete steps to support marriage and family.