

CONCLUSIONS ON: 'INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY, WELFARE AND HUMAN ECOLOGY'*

A Threefold Crisis

The conference papers made clear that the immense and rapid demographic and economic transitions of the late twentieth century have generated a welfare crisis and a crisis in family life both in developed and developing societies. Underlying these crises, and impeding effective remedies, is a crisis in human ecology, a deterioration of the social environment evidenced by a widespread breakdown of social norms. Many elements of these developments are historically unprecedented and thus pose new and difficult challenges for social science, social policy, and Catholic social thought.

The Welfare Crisis

The combination of falling birth rates and increased longevity is putting pressure on all social systems to which human beings look for support and security in times of need: the family, the structures of civil society, employment and related benefits, and public assistance. Although it is urgently necessary to address the problems linked to a shift in the ratio of active workers to the dependent population, few societies have taken even a few small steps.

The Family Life Crisis

Developments that indicate a widespread crisis in family life include, in affluent societies, dramatic increases in divorce and births outside marriage, dramatic decreases in birth rates and marriage rates, and a rising tendency to treat marriage as primarily for the benefit of the individual adults involved. In many developing countries, family life is undermined by crush-

* These Conclusions were drawn up by the President, Professor Mary Ann Glendon, and approved by the participants at the end of the X Plenary Session.

ing poverty and disrupted by migration. In many African countries, the AIDS pandemic has devastated family life by claiming the lives of a large proportion of parents and productive workers.

The Crisis in Social Environments

The weakening of child-raising families and their surrounding networks, together with a breakdown in social norms, amount to a social 'ecological crisis'. This deterioration in social environments has far-reaching implications for welfare – for it is hard to see how healthy economies, or socially conscious states can be sustained without the habits of cooperation, individual responsibility, and concern for others that are primarily nurtured in families and their surrounding networks. As with threats to the natural environment, many of the developments that endanger social environments are the by-products of genuine advances. Thus a central problem becomes: how can social, economic and political progress be advanced without eroding the cultural foundations upon which social, economic and political goods ultimately depend?

Efforts to address these three crises have been impeded by widespread acceptance among policy makers and social scientists of certain flawed assumptions about human beings and society. Discussions of welfare commonly suppose a view of society as composed of self-seeking individuals competing for scarce resources, rather than as a fabric of relationships, to a certain extent ambivalent and conflictual, in need of solidarity. Such views of personhood and society lead to approaching the welfare crisis in terms of conflict – conflict between old and young, rich and poor, men and women, child-raising and childless families.

Recommendations

In general, policy makers and social scientists should adopt a more 'ecological' approach to the crises of welfare, family life and social norms. That is, an approach aimed toward finding approaches that promote synergy among the four main pillars of support and security (and their respective criteria of social justice): the state (distributive justice); the market (equal opportunities); the family (sharing); and the mediating structures of civil society (mutual aid and extended reciprocity). The principle of subsidiarity is best understood as aimed at liberating the intelligence and creativity of individuals and social groups for the promotion of the common good.

Strengthening Family Life

The basic flaw in current state-based, market-based, and mixed approaches is that they neglect the family – either by treating society as a collection of individuals in competition with one another for scarce resources, or by treating the family as a public instrument to remedy failures of state and market. In so doing, they undercut the very solidarity that would be needed to remedy those failures.

- Policy makers must pay more conscious attention to families, recognizing the key role that families and their surrounding networks play in dealing with dependency. A nation without a conscious family policy has a family policy made by chance, by the operation of policies and programs in other areas that have an impact on families.

- Intergenerational solidarity is not just a matter of the relationship between those who are now young and at work and those who are older and retired, but also of the relationship between those who have had and reared children and those who have not. *The standard of living of married couples with children should not be worse than that of couples without children.* Men and women who raise children in stable marriage-based families are not just doing something for themselves and their children, but for society and the future. Their contribution to the formation of human capital is irreplaceable.

- Caregiving, paid or unpaid, needs to be recognized as socially valuable work.

- Policy makers must make it more feasible for those who are most motivated and best qualified to care for the sick, the elderly and the very young to do so.

- Means must be found to restore a sense of social opprobrium for those who neglect family responsibilities, and to counter the culture of immediate gratification fostered by the entertainment industry.

- When social institutions become involved with families, they should endeavor whenever possible to assist families in carrying out their proper functions, rather than trying to substitute for those functions.

Strengthening the Mediating Structures of Civil Society

- Accord more attention to the ‘mediating structures of civil society’, perhaps by undertaking studies of different types of mediating structures with a view toward finding examples of the most effective, and discovering what sustains or weakens them.

– Study the impact on child-raising families and mediating structures of programs and policies in other areas (labor, tax, social assistance) – by analogy to environmental impact studies in the natural sciences.

– Initiate pilot programs to find out what works and what does not, with a view toward building on successful experiments. Experiments using the mediating structures of civil society to perform some of the tasks that governments have assumed over the years might not only result in more efficient and humane delivery of some social services, but could strengthen the mediating structures themselves.

Addressing the Crisis of the Welfare State

– The conflict model that assumes that the gains of one generation can only be realized at the expense of others and the view that regards caring for others as only involving costs and burdens must be replaced by structures that promote cooperative solutions. It would be a disaster if the necessary adjustments drastically undermined social solidarity or led to the wholesale dismantling of the welfare state.

– The welfare state must be redesigned in such a way that it becomes durably functional again: a socially oriented state committed to the subsidiarity principle as well as to the solidarity principle.

Questions and Dilemmas for Further Consideration

Notwithstanding broad consensus on the urgency of protecting the social environments upon which all human beings fundamentally depend, it is extremely difficult to establish consensus on practical measures to be undertaken. Various well-intentioned laws and programs often have perverse unintended effects on family life, or interact with it in such complex ways that very little opportunity is afforded for purposeful planning. All too often, laws, programs and policies meant to strengthen families produce the opposite effects from those intended.

Therefore difficult questions remain:

Given that social policy for the past century has emphasized individual rights over the subjectivity of the family, could the family become an agent of its own development? Can the family be treated as a legal entity? And how can the family's surrounding and supporting institutions be reinvigorated, without stifling the legitimate freedom that is necessary for development?

Are changes in the meanings people attribute to family life leading toward a decline in the family as an ultimate concern or to the 're-norming' of society and to new forms of inter-generational solidarity?

Can one elaborate institutional modes of representation of 'children' or 'future generations', or formulate normative guidelines for the exercise of stewardship of parents for children and present generations for future ones?

How can society take account of children's needs (and the preferences of most mothers) without perpetuating women's subordination?

How can societies develop an adequate response to the immediate distress of many families while attempting to shift probabilities so that fewer families will find themselves in such distress in the future?

How can society respond to persons in need without perpetuating unhealthy forms of dependency?

How completely can a society respect individual freedom without undermining the stable familial and communal structures upon which it relies for the socialization of its future work force and citizenry?

How can solidarity with future generations be balanced with our responsibility to those among us who are most in need right now? ('The poor cannot wait').

Questions for Catholic Social Thought

Young people. Catholic social thought has been rather silent on the situation of young adults. A deeper analysis seems to be required of the new circumstances they face, both in society and within the family. The Church should address them more directly and fully in her teaching.

Should the Academy think of working with a view toward offering the Holy See elements, or an encyclical on inter-generational relations? If so, the work at this session would need to be supplemented by philosophical, theological, political and legal elaborations, and by deeper reflection on the person, society, and solidarity.