

A NEW ROLE FOR THE FAMILY IN THE STATE

MARY ANN GLENDON

Professor Zampetti's paper on "A New Role for the Family in the State", when considered together with President Malinvaud's overview of the social teaching of the Church on the topic of Inter-Generational Solidarity, brings out the close relationships among all four projects undertaken thus far by the Pontifical Academy. For *globalization* has been accompanied by the disruption everywhere of age-old patterns of *work* and family organization, while the weakening of *inter-generational solidarity* has jeopardized the health both of national economies and the world's *democratic experiments*.

In each of our four areas of concern, a major challenge for the social sciences (and for politics) is to become more attentive to the long-term costs and implications of decisions and behaviors that offer short-term advantages or attractions. Catholic social thought does, in fact, take a long view of social problems, but culturally entrenched habits of present-mindedness are difficult to overcome. As Tocqueville warned long ago, conditions in modern secular societies foster a "brutish indifference to the future, an attitude all too well suited to certain propensities in human nature".¹ Noting that religions foster enduring accomplishments by promoting habits of behaving with a view toward the long run, he predicted that in times of religious skepticism men would be more inclined to "give themselves over to the satisfaction of their least desires without delay". The present would grow so large in their minds that it would hide the future from their view. In republics where secularism and skepticism prevailed, he wrote, the "great business" of statesmen and philosophers would be to demonstrate to their fellow citizens that it is both necessary and possible to conceive and execute long-term under-

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Mansfield and Winthrop eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 521.

takings: they would have to “apply themselves to giving back to men this taste for the future which neither religion nor social conditions any longer inspire”; and must teach citizens “that wealth, renown, and power are the rewards of work; that great successes come when they have been long desired, and that nothing of lasting value is achieved without trouble”.

No one can accuse Professor Zampetti of present-mindedness: his visionary paper calls for nothing less than a fundamental transformation of the relations among families, the state, and the economy. It is as though he has taken us to a mountain top from which, looking backward along the path we have traveled up to now, we see a landscape scarred by earthquakes – social upheavals that have destroyed many of our familiar landmarks. On the other side of the mountain, however, he offers a view of where we might go – a view, so to speak, of a promised land with a “new role for the family” in a new type of state with a new sort of economy.

In these comments on Professor Zampetti’s vision, I will begin at the bottom of the mountain, where twenty-first century men and women move among the ruins of many traditional signposts, gathering strength and seeking guidance for an arduous journey toward what we hope will be a civilization of life and love. First, I will briefly second his view of the gravity of the situation in which we find ourselves. Next, I will consider certain dilemmas that arise when one tries to imagine how his vision of a better arrangement might be brought to life. And finally, I will offer some observations on the more “ecological” way of thinking about persons, family, civil society, and the state that Malinvaud and Zampetti recommend.

The Perils of Ignoring Changes in Family Behavior

With the spread of various sorts of democratic regimes in recent years, there has been much rejoicing over the symbolism and reality of free elections. But as Zampetti reminds us, there is more to self-government than voting for representatives. A fundamental prerequisite for a healthy republic with democratic elements is a continuing supply of citizens who possess certain kinds of habits and attitudes.² History and experience have taught us that there are conditions that are more, or less, favorable to the maintenance of freedom and self-government – and that

² According to the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, democratic self-government requires a higher degree of virtue in the citizenry than any other form of government, *Federalist No. 55* (Madison).

those conditions involve the character and competence of citizens and public servants. But character and competence, too, have conditions – conditions residing in nurture and education.

It seems obvious therefore that friends of democracy must be vitally concerned about everything that affects the family's ability to nurture and educate. It is primarily the family setting that determines whether or not people develop such qualities as: self-restraint, respect for others, honesty, ability to cooperate, independence of mind, concern for the vulnerable, and attentiveness to the natural and probable consequences of one's actions. Changes in the family's capacity to instill those habits and attitudes cannot help but affect the prospects for a regime of ordered liberty.³ Yet the family's role in teaching and transmitting republican virtues from one generation to the next has generally been taken for granted.

The time is now long overdue to take stock of the social, economic and political effects of the upheavals in family behavior that occurred in the late twentieth century. These changes have not only impaired the family's ability to nurture and educate children, but its role as a support institution.⁴ In the more affluent countries, declining birth rates, with the consequent narrowing ratio of workers to retirees, are putting severe pressure on health care systems, and on public and private pension plans. Equally ominous is the fact that *no society has yet come up with an adequate solution to the problem of loss of caretakers for the very young, the sick, and the frail elderly that took place when women moved en masse into the paid labor force.*

³ Or indeed the prospects for any strong, healthy polity. Consider the following passage from a popular history of Rome: "Augustus could not conceive a strong Rome without the character, courage and political ability that had marked the old Roman, above all, the old aristocracy. The decay of the ancient faith among the upper classes had washed away the supernatural supports of marriage, fidelity and parentage; the passage from farm to city had made children less of an asset and more of a liability and a toy; women wished to be sexually rather than maternally beautiful; in general the desire for individual freedom seemed to be running counter to the needs of the race... A large number of native-stock Romans avoided parenthood altogether, preferring prostitutes or concubines even to a varied succession of wives. Of those who married, a majority appear to have limited their families by abortion, infanticide, coitus interruptus, and contraception". Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944), 222.

⁴ The literature is vast. For useful surveys, see Marie-Thérèse Meulders-Klein, *La personne, la famille, le droit: trois décennies de mutations en occident* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1999), and James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002). For discussion of the changing relationships among family, state and employment as determinants of status and economic security, see M. Glendon, *The New Family and the New Property* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1981).

Dilemmas of Imagining a New Role for the Family in the State

Faced with this state of affairs, many have called for a renewed sense of solidarity among the generations. But it is not easy to imagine how that might be fostered. Many of the developments that produced changes in family behavior – and in ideas about family life – seem practically irreversible. Many of the developments that have weakened family ties, moreover, are widely believed to represent advances for individuals and society.

Consider the following instances of attenuation of inter-generational bonds:

– *Fathers and children.* With the rise in divorce and births to single women, an unprecedented proportion of children are now being raised in fatherless homes. What will be the effect on the social environment of increasing numbers of children coming to child-bearing age with little idea of what a father does, what it means to be a “good family man”, or how men and women can surmount the difficulties that arise in any marriage?

– *Mothers and children.* Reacting in part to the increasing unreliability of marriage as a support institution, women are having fewer children, and many are maintaining at least a foothold in the labor force even when their children are very young. (That strategy, however, still does not protect mothers and children very effectively against what I call the four deadly Ds: divorce, disrespect for nonmarket work, disadvantages in the workplace for anyone who takes time out for family responsibilities, and the destitution that afflicts so many female-headed families).

– *Parental role in the education of children.* With the modern state’s virtual monopoly on schooling, the family has lost much of its ability to transmit values. Its powerful competitors – the government schools and the entertainment industry – often promote values that undermine the values of the family, especially religious and moral teachings.

– *Inter-generational solidarity with weak and dependent family members.* With the acceptance of abortion as a woman’s right has emerged a mentality that treats inconvenient or defective unborn children as disposable. How will men and women raised with that mentality deal with their elderly parents when those parents become inconvenient, incapacitated, and expensive? Ironically, just as we have begun to congratulate ourselves on having reached the point where our societies are more attentive to the needs of their weakest and most vulnerable members, we begin to see how fragile that achievement has become.

(E.g.: Consider the following excerpt from a December 2001 *New Yorker* magazine interview with one of America's most influential judges: "When his father grew very frail and sick, Posner asked the gerontologist what the point of keeping him alive with all these procedures was; the doctor informed him that termination of care had to be voluntary. 'Because my father was more or less *compos mentis* and wanted treatment, you couldn't deny it', Posner says. 'I loved my parents when I was growing up and they were really the sort of parents you should be grateful to. But my thoughts about them are dominated by their old age. When I think about them there's no affection....So many people have these decrepit, horrible old parents, and then they're so upset when they die at ninety. My father was even annoyed when my mother died – he thought the doctors hadn't tended her carefully enough – though by the time she died she couldn't speak or use her hands, she wasn't human....I hope my generation can be a little more rational about this'.⁵)

(Even ten years ago, it would have been difficult to imagine a prominent jurist expressing such sentiments in a national magazine).

– *Manufacture of children*. With the advent of new bio-technologies, the link between sexual relations and procreation has been broken, a new eugenics has become possible, and the "consumerist" mentality decried by Zampetti threatens even to affect attitudes toward children. The increasing ability to exercise human control over the processes and "products" of human reproduction will affect the very meaning of having children in ways that are difficult to foresee. What are the implications of allowing reproductive activities to become increasingly technological and commercialized? What will it mean for one generation to design, redesign, "improve" or select the genetic characteristics of the next generation?⁶

– *The deconstruction of "the family"*. With the proliferation and increasing acceptability of alternative life-styles, marriage-based, child-raising families have lost their privileged position in many legal systems. The definition of "the family" is highly contested.

⁵ L. MacFarquhar, "The Bench Burner", *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2001, 78.

⁶ Many scientists claim that these developments are both imminent and inevitable. E.g., Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Our Inevitable Genetic Future* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 2002) ("As scientists rapidly improve their ability to identify and manipulate genes, people will want to protect their future children from diseases, help them live longer, and even influence their looks and their abilities. Neither governments nor religious groups will be able to stop the coming trend of choosing an embryo's genes").

The causes of these developments are much disputed, but that they are affecting the bonds among generations is undeniable. To list the factors that are usually implicated is to realize that Zampetti's call for the state to "defend the human environment" poses enormous difficulties: geographic mobility, the separation of home and business, the rise and decay of great cities, the atrophy of local government, the loss of the unpaid work of women in the home and the voluntary sector, individualism, consumerism, divorce, the contraceptive mentality, and (in some places) shortages of marriageable males. As suggested above, many of the threats to family stability are unintended consequences of goods and freedoms that modern men and women prize.

Zampetti has placed before us an attractive vision of a society where the dignity of the human person is the highest value; a society where the family has priority over the state; a society where all legitimate types of work are respected; a society where families, local communities and the mediating structures enjoy an appropriate autonomy – in short, a society that would be a showcase for the personalist vision of subsidiarity and solidarity that is embodied in Catholic Social Thought.

But how could such a society be brought into being? Zampetti deplors that many roles that formerly belonged to the family have now been assumed by the state. He notes that the state is less and less capable of fulfilling the roles it has assumed, but at the same time the family has lost much of its capacity to care for its own members. Hence a major dilemma: It seems that we would need a certain kind of family to have better social and political organizations, but we would need a certain kind of social and political organization to have this kind of family. Good institutions set the conditions for good habits to take root, but good institutions depend on good habits and attitudes. How and where to begin?

Implications for the Social Sciences

That conundrum should spur us toward a more interdisciplinary and "ecological" way of thinking about social, economic and political questions. Here, for example, are a few questions that come to mind in anticipation of the discussions we will have on the Academy's inter-generational solidarity project:

1. Should we not think in terms of setting conditions and shifting probabilities, as well as about finding solutions and compelling outcomes?

2. Should we pay as much attention to the immediate environments of families – the “mediating structures of civil society” – as to families themselves, considering that the mediating structures have lost much of their ability to support and sustain families in periods of stress?
3. Should we investigate the impact on families of programs and policies in other areas (labor, tax, social assistance) – by analogy to environment impact studies in the natural sciences?
4. Should we encourage political decision-makers to pay more conscious attention to family policy? After all, 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.
5. Should we encourage political decision-makers to initiate pilot programs to find out what works and what doesn't, with a view toward building on what works? What about experiments with using the mediating structures of civil society to perform some of the tasks that government has assumed over the years (not only because this would likely result in more efficient and humane delivery of services like health care and education, but because the mediating structures themselves – an endangered element of the human environment – might well be strengthened)?
6. Should we encourage political decision-makers to reinforce parental control over the education of their children and to end governmental monopolies on the education of children?
7. Should we encourage political decision-makers to recognize the importance of the home economy, and the costs of raising children? How can we respond to Professor Zampetti's call for giving mothers a real choice about staying home with young children? How can we 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? (After all, those who make the necessary sacrifices to raise children well do not just benefit themselves, but confer a benefit on society as a whole).
8. What can be done about the loss of social opprobrium for those who neglect family responsibilities, or the culture of immediate gratification fostered by the entertainment industry?

Finally, it should be said that perhaps the greatest challenge for a more ecological approach to the topic of inter-generational solidarity arises from a conflict of solidarities: how does solidarity with future generations fit with our responsibility to those among us who are most in need right now?

How can we 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? That problem was nicely symbolized by the well-intentioned efforts of President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s to develop a family policy for the United States. Carter convened a White House Conference on Families and appointed as its head a white, married, father of five. That step was angrily criticized by welfare rights advocates and others who argued that poor, female-headed families were the ones that needed the most urgent attention. Carter then appointed a black, divorced, single mother as co-chair of the Conference. That prompted the original chairman to resign, and the White House Conference became one of many casualties of the culture wars.

The matter is obviously one that requires the utmost intelligence, good judgment and political wisdom. In a time when inter-generational bonds are widely disrupted, the resulting human situations must be addressed with compassion and generosity. The casualties of broken families must not be ignored, and persons engaged in various forms of cohabitation should not be subjected to unjust discrimination. At the same time, however, care must be taken to assure that the marriage-based, child-raising family is not treated as just another "life-style".

In his highly useful background document, Professor Malinvaud has called attention to a number of changing areas where the Church's social teaching might be amplified and where the Academy's investigations and deliberations might prove helpful: the particular difficulties encountered by teenagers and young adults, education, the welfare state, and the natural and social environments. As the Academy moves into this new and challenging area of inter-generational solidarity, there is no better guide for the spirit of our endeavors than *Centesimus Annus* which reminds us that, where transformation of culture is sought, "the first and most important task is accomplished within man's heart" (51). The way out of the dilemmas posed above begins with the recognition that we are not helplessly trapped in institutions. Human beings are capable of reflecting upon their existence and of making judgments concerning whether the society they live in is the kind of society they wish for their children and future generations. Those judgments, of course, can be powerfully influenced by the settings in which we find ourselves, but those settings in turn can be influenced to some extent by reflection and choice.

The "specific and decisive contribution of the Church", according to *Centesimus Annus*, will be at the level of formation, helping to shape the

understanding we have of ourselves and our destiny in the world (51). True, formation has suffered with the impairment of the value-transmitting capacities of families and the mediating structures of civil society. But even that downward cycle could be reversed. At least that was what Tocqueville thought, when he speculated that if statesmen and philosophers in times of irreligion could habituate citizens to think of the future, they “would bring them little by little and without their noticing it toward religious beliefs”.

When men have become accustomed to foreseeing from very far what is likely to befall them in this world, and to nourishing themselves on hopes for it, they can hardly keep their thoughts always confined within the precise limits of this life, and will be ready to break out through those limits and consider what is beyond....Thus the means that permit men up to a certain point to do without religion are perhaps, after all, the only means we still possess for bringing mankind back, by a long and roundabout path, to a state of faith.