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Something Worth Celebrating

John Cardinal Wright

This article, written by a great leader of the Church who strongly believed in family life, is being published posthumously. The Cardinal passed away in August, 1979.

The word "celebrate" needs a bit of refreshment. So many things are "celebrated" that the spirit has gone out of the word. At the most, the word has become routine and is used to mark with a certain festivity, joyous and probably informal, however temporarily, anything from an anniversary of graduation to the independence of the nation.

It governs some peoples' notion of what the Church's ought to be, as opposed to the more sober and traditional concept of a *leitourgia* or public duty. But the word "celebrate" has an older sense. If it now refers to a joyous festivity, it does so only because it once referred simply to the crowding together of people which made the "festivity" possible. As a result, events are "celebrated" by doing something joyful, even when they merely call for being noted. "Celebration" is not something that cheerful people *do*; it is something that happens to everyone who knows about it, to the location where it takes place, to the lives of all involved.

With these rich meanings in mind — "togetherness" in joy, significant festivity, immeasurable happy significance — I am calling for a new kind of celebration of almost infinite joyful implications and promise. It is high time, and long since high time, to offset the almost universal death wish that has reduced families to statistics, nations to an impotence that is already being felt (France), and life itself to a kind of dread, especially when it becomes numerous and abundant. Clemenceau once said that the birth of a single baby is a joy for the family into which it is born. Now, however, we multiply the cause for that joy by a million and cite it as an appalling statistic, a weapon with which to clobber Congress or the public into criminal actions against

life through the murder that is abortion or into the far less than generous thing that "planned parenthood" usually turns out to be. *I am therefore pleading for a return to the celebration of the large family.* I am pleading for the kind of love for life that will see the large family as a good thing, not a problem, crucially necessary by standards *both human and divine*, a focus and fountain of *hope*, rather than a virtue shriveled into shaking apprehension by an age already only half alive.

Now any priest who says this is going to come under suspicion at once. What does *he* know from experience of the problem? Moreover, in praising the large family, is he perhaps engaged in nothing more than a clumsy attempt to shore up the tottering authority of *Humanae Vitae*? Is he perhaps implementing a crafty Church policy, aimed at the steady augmentation of Catholic numbers and, thus, at a Catholic hegemony over more and more of the world? Worse still, is he allowing his celibate irresponsibility to make him heartlessly indifferent to the hardship suffered by poor people who have more children than they can feed properly or bring up decently?

Priest's Family Background

To this last accusation, at least, I reply with some warmth. It is true that a priest has neither the responsibilities nor the pleasures of natural fatherhood. But he does not, on that account, live in total detachment from the human condition and from family life. He was not born already tonsured, with a tiny biretta on his head. He passed his earlier and most formative years as a member of some family — large or small, rich or poor, as the case may be — and eventually found himself in some parish, where his close-up familiarity with the tragic side of life was only rivaled by the doctor's. I can dare claim experience of poverty, and of the difficulties faced by those who have large families. My mother and father were depression-time parents, though they didn't allow that fact to dominate our young lives. When I was graduated from prep school, my father was earning the princely salary of \$19 a week. This bought more than such a sum would buy nowadays, but not very much, even so. In various parts of the world there was then — and there still is — poverty of a much more extreme kind, such as makes parenthood an almost impossible burden. But no priest I know responds to this with heartlessness. Renunciation always opens one's eyes to the value of whatever it is one renounces; and in my experience, clerical celibacy tends to make the priest exceptionally aware of children as a splendor and blessing, and angry, therefore, with any social or economic system which inflicts hardship upon them, and even more angry at the insolence of those comfortable people who tell the poor not to have so many babies. While he may thus become

something of a revolutionary, though not of the cruel Marxist kind, he is most unlikely to become heartless.

The heartless, perhaps, are those who would deny others, judged by standards not their own, the joy of children. "Have you ever noticed," John F. Kennedy is reported to have asked Ted Sorenson, I think it was, after a meeting with a Planned Parenthood committee that had come to argue its cause, "that when people speak to there being too many children around, they mean other people's children?"

As for the argument that the Church's attitude toward contraception is "demographically" motivated as a clever way of increasing the Catholic head-count, a cynical observation deserves a cynical reply. If that were really our purpose, we didn't set about it very sensibly. We ought to have said that while contraception is wrong for Catholics, it's fine and splendid for everybody else; thus, while increasing our own numbers, we would have encouraged Protestants and atheists and agnostics to die out. In fact, by saying that this was a matter of natural law, we encouraged *them* to increase *their* numbers also; and this, if they had taken any notice, would have hindered our alleged plan for world domination rather than helping it along.

With respect to *Humanae Vitae*, I don't believe its authority is, in fact "tottering," except in the eyes of those numerous people who are infected with a kind of corporate death wish and despair. It is a document which deserves more careful study than it usually gets, because it is the summary of Church tradition on the subject. Many people appear to see it simply and solely as a moral prohibition, and one that seems arbitrary. It is some part of my present purpose to remedy this kind of tunnel vision by suggesting a wider perspective, within which Pope Paul was talking primarily about *hope*.

Put Emphasis Elsewhere

Initially, however, I would like to put the emphasis elsewhere. What is it, this "large family" that I propose to celebrate? Anthropologists distinguish between the "nuclear family" and the "extended family." When we Catholics celebrate family life, asserting its importance as the basic unit of society and the home of freedom and trying to defend it against its numerous present-day enemies, it's usually the "nuclear family" that we have in mind, the human but still holy trinity of father and mother and children. God forbid that I should say anything against that, or even play down its importance in the faintest way! And yet the larger phenomenon calls for celebration as well, as I know from my own fortunate experience.

I can think of two reasons for our relative but habitual neglect of the "extended family," the kinship group or clan. In the first place, it's within the "nuclear family" that certain moral issues arise most acutely. Some of these — not all — are sexual in their subject matter.

The duties and temptations of an uncle or a grandmother or a second cousin, although real enough, are less obvious and clear-cut than those of a husband, a wife, a son, or a daughter. Then, we rightly hold in our minds the image and example of the Holy Family of Nazareth, of St. Joseph and Our Lady and the Child; and we may possibly forget that during those 30 "hidden years," our Lord didn't live in a social or, in the wider sense, a familial vacuum. He had other kinsfolk, and some of them are mentioned in the Gospels. He also had that great blessing, a saintly and undoubtedly devoted grandmother, whose intercession we might perhaps invoke more than we do, and perhaps with a grandchild's easy confident informality, as was once recommended by a poet whose name I cannot now remember:

The grandmother of God, the Word made Man,
Is called in heavenly circles, "Great St. Anne."
No doubt we ought to use such lofty language normally,
But in the family circle, we may speak more informally,
And say "St. Annie"!
(She is God's Grannie.)

Our Lord had, of course, the pleasure and privilege of growing up in what we so patronizingly call a "primitive" or "underdeveloped" society, one in which kinsfolk would normally remain within fairly close contact with one another. Easy long-distance transportation has made a great many of us less fortunate in this respect. A child needs grandparents (sometimes as allies against his own father and mother), but will not have them effectively if they live half a continent away. And they, in that situation, will also forfeit the particular pleasures of grandparenthood, which include much of the fun of parenthood without its responsibility. In much the same way, every young bride will sooner or later need to run home to mother and burst into tears and explain that her husband is proving totally *impossible*. With any luck, she'll be able to get it off her chest and be back home before her imperfect spouse has returned from work. The longer her journey is, the more packing and preparation it involves, the harder it will be for her to embark upon that resigned journey home. The "extended family," united geographically as well as emotionally, offers great human support to the "nuclear family."

It is also psychologically supportive for all its members, since it provides an extensive and solid structure within which individuals can feel a sense of rootedness and belonging, as third-generation immigrants have recently been discovering.

The lack of any such sense, its absence from so many young lives, is one of the ugliest social phenomena of our time, generating a huge proportion of those evils which the Welfare State attempts, so crudely, so extravagantly, to remedy.

Social-Welfare Groups' Work

Look carefully at the work done, or attempted, by all these proliferating social-welfare agencies, with their vast budgets and their comfortable bureaucrats. Why is this work necessary? How has it come to be seen as the government's business? Overwhelmingly, we need to answer both questions in terms of "the breakdown of family life," and at both levels. Something of the kind is inevitable. The "nuclear family" is a rather fragile thing, too easily breakable by death and also (given the weakness of human nature) by desertion, including that legalized desertion which we call divorce. It must always give the child his primary sense of support and belonging, but he also needs the further sense of security, economic and emotional, which a close-knit kinship group can provide. When this breaks down, it's hardly less of a disaster than when the "nuclear family" does, notably because of the relational malnutrition which will then be suffered by the young. The stress thus generated is amply visible in the inner cities of today, and if all else fails, the taxpayer must do his best to put things right. But he can't do much, and this isn't his or the government's job. Social welfare is primarily the nuclear family's own job, and, then, in the event of any kind of failure, it's the business of kinsfolk, who, therefore, need to exist and to be around.

In a clumsy attempt at objectivity, I have made these various observations in the most dry and arid language that lies at my command, just as though — in the wrath of God — I were some kind of sociological inquirer. I really do need some such version of self-control, of self-denial. If I let myself go and embark upon an untrammelled "celebration" of the extended family as experienced by myself, in all its supportive richness and delight, I might be suspected (in this cynical age) of romantic fantasy.

The cynic does have a point, of course. Nothing in this world is perfect, the Abiding City is elsewhere; and wherever charity fails or goes sour, that very closeness and involvement which should make family life into an earthly Heaven can convert it into something very like an earthly Hell. No kind of social structure can ever be an effective substitute for the love of God and neighbor, nor can any scheme dreamed up by politicians and implemented by bureaucrats. But in defiance of the cynic, and of so many gloomy novels and movies, I must at least report my own empirical findings, which are to the effect that where that twofold charity *does* exist, the extended family, or closeknit circle of blood-relations, offers it the most splendid field of operation, for the good of the individual and of society, effectively in this world and in the next as well.

Its value has been widely perceived among men, and used to find a kind of embodiment in the institutions of hereditary monarchy and aristocracy. At their worst, as we all know, these have been atrocious

institutions; and even their best side needs to be mentioned cautiously by any American who doesn't want to be suspected of deviationist thinking. But at the questionable level of politics and power-wielding, they did at least lay emphasis upon the importance of *belonging to a family*, of having one's place in a structure of kinship, in sharp contrast to the citizen's atomization in the democratic but unstructured societies of our times. Something similar lies behind that veneration of ancestors which gave such stability to old-time China. It should not be called *ancestor-worship*.

'Ancestor Worship Day'

I remember talking about this, many years ago, to a Buddhist priest in Taiwan; and if I wanted to let myself go and embark upon the most shamelessly personal "celebration" of family life, I would tell the full story of how we took his hint and established an annual "Ancestor Worship Day" or gathering of the clans within my own extended family. Extended it certainly is: about 60 of us come together, on the Saturday evening which lies closest to the anniversary of my father's death, with enough wives and sweethearts present to make it clear that the process of extension is by no means completed yet. I offer Mass for one and all, I preach at them, and at the time of the Bidding Prayers, a representative of each nuclear family stands up to speak of the joys and sorrows of the year gone by. Then we celebrate the Lord's bounty by doing justice to a tremendous dinner; and a dance follows, people taking partners without regard to age or generation, all joyous together in the relational richness conferred upon us by our mere numbers, as well as by the ties of kinship and blood.

Dancing is no occupation for an elderly priest, even for one more athletic than I. So I sit it out, and consider this "celebration" under both of the aspects I mentioned earlier, as a coming or crowding together, and then and therefore as a joyous festivity. Either way, you need numbers; and as the numbers go up, that relational richness does also, but much faster. (In such an assembly of 30 people, there will be a total of 870 possible relationships between individuals. But if their number doubles to 60, the number of their possible relationships won't double to 1,740; it will multiply itself by a little more than 4 to become 3,540. So, as though by compound interest, does a large clan make for human richness.)

A secular celebration, borrowed from Oriental paganism? In a way; but as my dear kinsfolk dance the evening out, I feel, watching them, that this is also a celebration of *piety*. (The complexity of that word deserves attention. Virgil is always applying it to Aeneas; and as Msgr. Ronald Knox pointed out a long time ago, his words *pious Aeneas* mean sometimes "Aeneas, that great leader of his comrades" and sometimes "Aeneas, that trained liturgiologist," but very often

“Aeneas, that dutiful son of his father.”) Piety, in all three senses of the word, is the guiding principle of our Ancestor Worship Day; and if its rubrical observance is governed by the date of my earthly father’s death, its underlying reference is, from first to last, to a greater Father and another death — one that was followed by a Resurrection.

We are still *in via*, and can form no adequate idea of what awaits us *in patria*. But if it’s a reality — which our family celebration provides us (however inadequately) with an image — we shall be blessed indeed. I never feel closer to Heaven.

The clan disperses; and in the cold gray light of morning, I consider the mathematics of the matter under another aspect. The large extended family, especially when united in the Faith, is a thing of immense social and human value: if it has become a relatively rare thing in our present-day society, that’s our loss and our folly, a prime cause of the social breakdown that afflicts us. But the mere figures decree that it must always be a secondary or derivative thing. It can only come into existence as a consequence of separate nuclear families that are large. A child may have many brothers and sisters, but he won’t have many uncles and aunts unless his parents had many brothers and sisters in their day; and so on outward, as far as the clan can possibly extend. So, by a circuitous route, we come back to the more obvious sense in which the large family is a thing to celebrate. When two parents give glad welcome to every child whom God sees fit to send them — a good thing in itself — they contribute significantly, in the long run, to the building of a mutually supportive structure of kinship.

A Most Obvious Fact

One of the most obvious facts about modern life is that the large family (in the nuclear sense) has great enemies. A widely-read review which manages to propagate contraception and Christian ethics simultaneously — and with a straight face — has recently published a speculation about whether children are necessary. (Presumably the time frame is restricted to the present generation, though no mention is made of God’s raising up children to Abraham from stones as the unreplenished population’s shrinkage becomes more dramatically evident.) The article suggests that they may not be, because: their economic function has been replaced by computers; their arrival is no longer the inevitable consequence of *matrimonium consummatum*; they are an obstacle to the “personal fulfillment” of the distaff half of humanity; their education has become so costly that it competes with 12-year-old Scotch and weekly visits to the analyst to the point that liberated couples have become forced to forego the classic pleasures of parenthood in the interest of basic survival. Many of the enemies of large families are politically influential; and I add that some are very

wealthy indeed. I have one particular family in mind, a rich family, God help us all, which has set itself squarely against richness and multiplicity in family life. With various such factors and the marked bias of the media, the young couples of today find themselves subjected to a quite extraordinary barrage of propaganda or brainwashing. They are told, grudgingly, that they may have 2.13 children if they really insist, but, if they temerarily exceed their ration, they will, in proportion to the scale of their offense, be held guilty of the most shocking irresponsibility, social and economic and, indeed, moral. Their own and their children's lives will also become miserable, and rightly so. They mustn't expect society to help them, and they mustn't be surprised if it eventually takes steps to prevent such sinful self-indulgence.

This is a prime dogmatic orthodoxy of our time. For many highly progressive and influential minds, the small family — kept small by any means, no matter how bloody or obscene — has become the one moral imperative of an otherwise relativistic and permissive society. Heavy and complex pressures are brought to bear on the young couple, indoctrinating them in just this sense.

If I marvel at this hostility to the large family, it isn't chiefly because as priest and prelate I feel obliged to toe the official Catholic line about contraception and abortion. I do in fact "toe the line" without difficulty, so long as those rather absurd words are allowed to mean that I recognize the common decencies of life and find my faith strengthened by the fact that the teaching Church stands by them so firmly against such heavy opposition. What staggers me is not so much the immorality proposed as the values implied, as though the large family were a kind of indecency; as though babies were a kind of sickness or infection, not capable of being stamped out altogether, but calling for the most rigorous control and containment. I've had the privilege of meeting a great many babies, and I can't even begin to see them in that light. No priest is ignorant of the evil in human life — remember, we hear confessions. But it's in babies and young children, not yet spoiled by individual sin, that the ontological splendor of our being is most obvious. Rejecting them seems to me like rejecting goodness itself in the purest form this world makes available. They call, rather, for celebration, and in proportion to their numbers.

Birthrate Arguments

It is often argued, of course, that low birthrates are an ecological and therefore a social, and therefore a moral imperative. After all, this world can only feed so many people. But as E.F. Schumacher pointed out (and he was a most profound student of these environmental and ecological matters) each baby is born with two hands but with only one mouth; and I find it hard to control my skepticism about all these

urgent calls for population control and therefore for small families. They come, overwhelmingly, from the affluent countries: population control is mostly something which rich people (mostly white) want to impose upon poor people (mostly black and brown), and is automatically suspect on that account. It is curious, moreover, that a country like Japan, half the size of Texas and with *no* oil, has become, despite the density of its population, one of the most affluent countries in the world. Where a reluctance to have large families exists at the individual level, contraception can scarcely be characterized as a morally conscientious response to the reported danger of overpopulation. That which came first can never be a response to that which came later; and the cause of the small family was already being passionately advocated — as “birth control” first of all, and then as “family planning” — long before there was any serious talk about overpopulation in an ecological sense.

“Responsible parenthood” is necessarily “generous parenthood” given the nature of the things to which parents are responsible and therefore generous: to the nation, to God, to their ancestors’ good name.

Different motivations, deeper passions, are involved in this widespread hatred of the large family, and I suspect these include a kind of fear. “The over-population problems,” said two well-known psychologists (Bach and Goldberg in *Creative Aggression*, 1974), “are providing an ideal rationalization for those who are too wary and frightened of family life”; and a good many couples, when off their guard, will admit frankly that they don’t want to be *tied down*. There is nothing new about the observation that the large family can be a drag, that it imposes limits upon its parents’ freedom for self-indulgence, and is naturally feared on this account. “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune,” said Bacon (*Essays*, 8). But he didn’t mean, as one might suppose, that the married man is horribly vulnerable to the pain of bereavement, since he went on to say, “. . . for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.”

The heart of the matter may lie deeper still. Economically and practically speaking, the large family is indeed a drag, distracting us from those precious “great enterprises” of ours. But it also imposes a heavier and more sustained demand upon the parents’ capacity to love, at a time when charity has so plainly grown cold — with the word *love* invoked everywhere so frantically and falsely. I take this to be the chief cause of its unpopularity.

I am a Catholic priest, committed, therefore, to the principle that salvation comes from love, from Love Himself, in person, and therefore through an acceptance of suffering. There is no doubt that things can be tough for those who have many children. The obvious consequence of this is that society should ease their problems as best it can,

economically and otherwise, and that a society which treats them meanly is a wickedly cruel society indeed. But it is also a most imprudent society. We *need* love far more seriously than we need "great enterprises" and an easy time. If we limit the scale of family life, we shall be limiting the primary field in which love operates, and with consequences that can only be disastrous, even at the human level.

This may perhaps sound like a too theoretical thing of the kind that priests can say too easily, sitting there in their comfortable ivory towers of celibacy. Let me add, therefore, that I find it backed up empirically. If I desire to celebrate the large family, this is primarily because of a fact which is almost painful in its simplicity: in general, other things being equal, large families are *much happier* than small families. A priest friend of mine went out to dinner in Rome with a family of nine children. He walked home with one of the little girls, about eleven years old.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"A mother," she spontaneously replied.

"How many children will you have?"

"Fourteen," came the quick answer. (Even a priest would be startled by such hopes.)

"Why fourteen?"

"Well, we are nine in my family and we have so much fun. If I have fourteen children, they will have even more fun." *Ex ore infantium* . . .

By this, I don't mean that large families live in perennial sunshine: no human life is like that. They do have more sunshine, more deployment and liveliness of love. But they are also better able to cope when the dark hours come, as they come sooner or later to everybody, even in small families. Take the death of a child, for example. It would be odious to suggest that this would be felt less grievously in the large family, since the parents still have others and aren't totally bereft, rather as a man with four cars would suffer only minor inconvenience if one of them were stolen. Children are not possessions, and love is not capable of such mathematical treatment. The point is that the large family, being a tough and many-stranded thing, can take such a shock and survive, resiliently though no less painfully, where anything more thin and fragile might snap under the strain and collapse into despair.

But I would prefer to end on a happier note, celebrating something which I have often experienced to my endless delight, namely, the distinctive atmosphere that is generated in a household by the fact that babies have always been welcomed there and never prevented. In such a household, the children know, subconsciously, perhaps, but certainly, that they were and are wanted, and did not come into existence as rare "planned" exceptions to a generally anti-baby conduct of life and love, or (like so many) as failures of the associated

technology. While their home can be a place of hardship and even of desperate poverty, it is also a place of habitual jubilation, of gratitude toward nature or fate if not explicitly toward God Who brought them into being.

Such a household is a shrine of love, and also (in this despairing age) a shrine of hope, "celebrated" in that root sense of comprising many people, deserving therefore to be "celebrated" in the current sense. I sing hymns to it, I blow trumpets and clash cymbals, I praise God: I beg you to do the same.

The world hates it, of course. But at the core of that hatred, can you not detect a small bitter note of envy?

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