

The Family in danger. Michael Harper.

The great Catholic author, G.K.Chesterton once wrote: 'this triangle of truisms of father, mother, and child, cannot be destroyed: it can only destroy those civilisations which disregard it.' During 1994 there is to be an International Year of the Family, and the subject is now being taken seriously by both parliament and religious leaders. Last September, the former Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, wrote about the family crisis in the Times newspaper: 'these insidious trends may well lead to the collapse of our civilised order altogether, as happened to the Roman empire under the weight of its moral degeneracy.'

There are those, even in the Church, who dispute the figures about family life, the rise in crime, and the collapse of respect for authority. I think they need to be taken very seriously. But one thing is beyond dispute, namely the change in attitude to sexual licence and crime – I mean the absence of shame. In the same article in the Times quoted above, Immanuel Jakobovits compares shame to pain. Pain protects health, it drives us to the doctor. 'Shame', he writes, 'does the same for moral health. Without shame, we would disport ourselves like the brutes. Only when Adam and Eve felt a sense of shame did they clothe themselves.....today, shame is being systematically displaced by brazen vulgarity..' Today people co-habit without shame, abort without shame, divorce without shame, and have illegitimate children without shame. 'They have no shame at all', the prophet Jeremiah complained of his generation. (8:12). Many Church leaders are culpable because they have been silent or evasive when these issues have been raised.

The moral high ground is now firmly occupied in Britain by the Roman Catholics (reinforced by the fine papal encyclical, 'Veritatis splendor'), Jewish leaders like the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, and even the Conservative Party. Sadly Anglicans are weak and indecisive.

First of all, we need to defend the family itself, a divine institution, from its detractors, some of whom are church leaders. Radical feminists have been attacking the traditional family for years. Thus Shulamith Firestone writes in 'The Dialectic of Sex': 'the modern nuclear family is only a recent development'. Again Germaine Greer in 'The Female Eunuch' says: 'the single marriage family ...is possibly the shortest lived familial system ever developed.' Sociologists and church leaders seem to concur with the statement once made by Sir Edmund Leach that the traditional family 'is a most unusual kind of organisation and I would predict that it is only a transient phase in our society.' Patently these statements are the opposite of the truth.

In Britain one of the bastions of the family has been the Mothers' Union. There was a time when divorcees could not be full members. Now one of their Vice-Presidents, herself a divorcee, writes in their magazine 'Home and Family' of the 'inflated importance given to the family'. Mrs. McMullen goes on to say that the nuclear family of

mother, father and children is not a blueprint with divine endorsement. With respect, she is dangerously wrong. The nuclear family was created by God, it does not need God's endorsement, but it does need ours.

We need to reject the false distinction made by sociologists between the nuclear and extended family. The extended family is only an extension of the nuclear family. Ferdinand Mount in his well documented book 'The Subversive Family' counters all these myths when he writes: 'the family is not an historical freak...it is neither a novelty nor the product of unique historical forces. The way most people live today is the way most people have always preferred to live when they had the chance..' In this book he documents how both Church and State have tried from Plato onwards to diminish or even destroy the family. There will always be those who would want forcibly to divert the resources and goodwill of the family to 'better' causes, 'God, nation, community or class' as Mount categorises them. The Church herself is not free from blame because it often puts an inordinate work-load on its ministers and lay people, and the family suffers as a result. But let us be of good cheer, the family usually triumphs. As anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, 'no matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps back.

After defending the family, we need to reassert the biblical principles of family life, given to us in Genesis, and applicable to all humans, not just Christians. Last January I began a serious study of the subject of gender, with special reference to the controversy over the ordination of women. I read up the subject widely, especially, of course, the Scriptures. I read over 30 books on a subject I had previously hardly considered. I was amazed at what I discovered.. I found myself more and more turning to the family, and in the end seeing that gender issues, which we make such heavy weather of, today, were settled by God in the first two chapters of the Bible. And everything else that follows in the Old and New Testaments bears testimony to those principles, and indeed the whole of world history supports these chapters. Even well-known secular anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Steven Goldberg agree with what one of them has called 'the inevitability of patriarchy'.

The full picture will be in my next book: 'Equal and different', but I believe the most important aspect of the subject has been largely ignored by the Church, namely that fathers are to be fathers and mothers mothers, and their roles are not interchangeable To have women as heads of parishes and dioceses is to deal another serious blow at the basic divine framework of the family, at a time when the family is disintegrating. It is wholly inappropriate when single parent families are becoming the norm in our society, and when the restoration of responsible fathering is our greatest need, to appoint women as heads in the Churches. By doing so the Anglican Church is forsaking the divine pattern of patriarchy, established in the Old Testament and endorsed by both Christ, the apostles and church tradition, and further weakening the nuclear family structure.