

# Why Marriage Matters to Children and to the Common Good

*By Maggie Gallagher*

For Catholics marriage is a sacrament, revealing Christ's indestructible love. The Catholic tradition has always recognized that marriage is also a natural relationship. People of any faith or none can marry, and their marriages matter to God, to each other, to their children, and to the community. Concern for marriage is thus part of our Catholic commitment to social justice for children and of our commitment to the common good.

A large body of social science evidence confirms that marriage protects children. *Child Trends* sums up this consensus:

Research clearly demonstrates that family structure matters for children, and the family structure that helps the most is a family headed by two biological parents in a low-conflict marriage. Children in single-parent families, children born to unmarried mothers, and children in stepfamilies or cohabiting relationships face higher risks of poor outcomes. ... There is thus value for children in promoting strong, stable marriages between biological parents. (1)

A group of respected marriage and family scholars recently met to document the social science evidence that marriage matters. While there are, of course, single parents who do a splendid job of childrearing under very difficult circumstances, the scholars reached these conclusions among others:

**Marriage reduces the risk of poverty for children and communities.** The majority of children whose parents don't marry or don't stay married experience at least a year of poverty.

**Fatherless households increase crime.** Boys whose parents divorced or never married are two to three times more likely to end up in jail as adults.

**Marriage protects children's physical and mental health.** Children whose parents marry and stay married are healthier and much less likely to suffer mental illness, including depression and teen suicide.

**Both men and women who marry live longer, healthier, and happier lives.** On virtually every measure of health and well-being, married people are better off.

**Cohabiting is not the same as marriage.** Married couples who cohabit before marrying are 30 to 50 percent more likely to divorce. Couples who just live together without the commitment of marriage do not get the same boost to health, welfare, and happiness, on average, as spouses. Nor do their children. Children whose parents cohabit are at increased risk for domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect. Children born to parents

who were just living together are also three times more likely to experience their parents' breakup by age five.

**Parent who don't marry or stay married put children's education at risk.** Children whose parents divorced or never married have lower grade-point averages, and are more likely to be held back a grade, and to drop out of school.

**When marriages fail, ties between parents and children typically weaken, too.** In one large national survey, 65 percent of adult children of divorce reported they were *not* close to their fathers (compared to 29 percent of adults from intact marriages). (2)

Any development that weakens the norms of the married family will increase all these risks to children and to the communities in which these children live.

Consider, for example, just one increased risk: criminal and delinquent behavior. An impressive number of studies confirm that individual children are more likely to engage in criminal conduct when raised in fatherless households. For example, a 2000 study of crime in rural counties in four states concluded: "[A]n increase of 13% in female-headed households would produce a doubling of the offense rate. ..." (3) A study following 6,403 males from their teens to their early thirties concluded that after controlling for race, income, and family background, boys raised outside of intact marriages were 2 to 3 times more likely to commit a crime that leads to incarceration."(4)

In a large sample of 4,671 eighth-graders attending 35 schools in ten cities, researchers found that students attending schools with a higher proportion of teens from single-parent families committed more violent offenses, regardless of their own family's structure. "[I]t matters how many single-parent families a student is exposed to, regardless of whether the student has one or two parents in the home." (5)

The benefits of intact and lasting marriage for children described by social science do not appear to flow directly from the legal status of marriage. So it is not the case that government could transfer these benefits to other family forms by giving them legal recognition. Children living with remarried parents, for example, do no better on average than children with single mothers. (6) Scientific data thus suggest that marriage law protects children to the extent that it increases the likelihood that children will be born to, and raised by, their own mother and father in a stable and reasonably harmonious union.

Relatively little is known from a scientific standpoint about how children fare when raised by same-sex couples. After reviewing several hundred studies, University of Virginia sociologist Steven Nock concluded: "[N]ot a single one of those studies was conducted according to generally accepted standards of scientific research." (7)

A literature review by two scholars in the Fall 2005 issue of *The Future of Children*, a peer-reviewed journal published jointly by Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, concluded: "What the evidence does not provide, because of the methodological difficulties we outlined, is much knowledge about whether

those studied are typical or atypical of the general population of children raised by gay and lesbian couples. We do not know how the *normative* child in a same-sex family compares with other children.” (8) Children raised by same-gender couples remain a social experiment, about which we can say little with scientific certainty.

*Marriage Matters for the Good of Society*

Reconnecting marriage with its great historic cross-cultural task of encouraging men and women to beget and raise the next generation has never been a more urgent priority. On the one hand, a large majority of modern democracies are now experiencing very low birthrates, amid increasingly urgent concern about the social, economic, and political consequences. The European Union’s total fertility rate from 1995 to 2000, for example, was only 1.42 children per woman. The European rate is sufficiently below the 2.1 replacement level that demographers label this rate “very low fertility.” (9) In 2004, a U.N. demographer warned:

A growing number of countries view their low birth rates with the resulting population decline and ageing to be a serious crisis, jeopardizing the basic foundations of the nation and threatening its survival. Economic growth and vitality, defense, and pensions and health care for the elderly, for example, are all areas of major concern. (10)

There is no agreement on the causes of low fertility, and they are likely to be complex.(11) But the move away from preference for marriage, as well as a decline in appreciation of marriage as a childbearing institution, play a clear role: “Low fertility can also be linked to the movement away from marriage, which many western European countries have experienced for the recent decades.” (12)

At the same time, all developed countries, including the United States, are experiencing large increases in family fragmentation as more marriages dissolve and more children are born to sexual unions that are not marriages.

As the eminent legal scholar and religious historian John Witte notes:

Procreation ... means more than just conceiving children. It also means rearing and educating them for spiritual and temporal living. ... The good of procreation cannot be achieved in this fuller sense simply through the licit union of husband and wife in sexual intercourse. It also requires maintenance of a faithful, stable, and permanent union of husband and wife for the sake of their children. (13)

The only realistic way that men and women can offer this protection to their children is to commit to an enduring, faithful, and exclusive sexual partnership that includes the whole of life.

Despite ready access to contraception and abortion, and despite their widespread use, numerous studies confirm that sex between men and women continues to result in babies.

Nationally, three-fourths of births to unmarried couples were *unintended* by at least one of the parents. (14) By their late thirties, 60 percent of American women have had at least one unintended pregnancy. (15) Almost 4 in 10 women aged 40-44 have had at least one unplanned birth. (16) The vast majority of children born to married couples will have a mother and a father committed to caring for them. Most children conceived in sexual unions other than marriage will not. (17)

Marriage is also important for the intergenerational transmission of faith. Children of Catholics who divorce are particularly likely to separate from the Church as adults. Getting married, staying married, building loving marriages, and having children are the principle means through which a community propels itself into the future. When a nation or faith community succeeds in transmitting a powerful vision of marriage to the next generation, the result is not only good for children, it is vital to the future of the whole community.

Is it possible to do a better job building a stronger marriage culture among Catholics?

Yes. We can take inspiration from other religious groups who are fighting the same deconstructing forces in the public culture. In the United States, for example, recent estimates show that “modern Orthodox” Jewish families have on average 3.3 children, with ultra-Orthodox having 6.6 children on average. (18) At an academically oriented modern-Orthodox day school in Manhattan, 15-year-old boys and girls were asked how many children they would like to have. “Only two gave two as their ideal number, and none wanted fewer than that. A large majority named four. ... Orthodox communal culture encourages child-bearing, and has more thoroughly insulated itself from the ‘substantial downward pressures’ that ... are currently depressing the overall size of the Jewish population. ...” (19)

The family is the prime evangelizer, one of the most powerful incubators of religious faith and identity. (20) Christianity grew from a tiny group in Jerusalem to the faith of the Roman Empire in just 300 years. Playing no small part in this rise was Christian sexual ethics which, unlike secular Roman ethics, forbade infanticide, contraception, and non-marital sexuality, and discouraged family disruption and desertion. (21)

If the Church community succeeded in finding the energy and means to transmit a Catholic vision of marriage and family only to churchgoing Catholics and their children, so that they became ten percent more likely to marry, stay married, and have children who grow up with a similar commitment to building families, both the Church and the public square would be transformed within thirty years. Given the radical changes in the social ecology of the family, we may never “go back” to the situation that prevailed as recently as the 1950s. The good news is that to move forward we do not have to return to those days.

We may not be able to change the minds of those now committed to postmodern sexual ideas. We can and must inspire, re-educate, serve, and protect those Catholics who want to recommit to a Catholic vision of marriage and family. The next generation is watching.

They need to see us confidently defend marriage in the pews and in the public square.

In this context, the three most urgent tasks for the Church are to:

- a. affirm the value of children in the mind of the Catholic community
- b. develop ministries and programs to help distressed couples avoid divorce and rebuild loving marriages
- c. help, support, and teach Catholic parents seeking to transmit their marriage vision to their own children, in the face of an increasingly confused and hostile public square.

The task in renewing marriage is no less than to renew, for this generation and the next, faith in love. Contemporary views of marriage advocate disposable human relations, disconnected from any larger purpose. But human beings desperately want to believe that our deepest drives and longings have a purpose, that they are directing us toward love, goodness, renewal. In marriage, men and women come together in faith to make the future happen. These are not private and personal matters, but the shared urgent business of the entire community.

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### ***End Notes***

1. Moore, Kristin Anderson, *et al.*, “Marriage from a Child’s Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children and What Can We Do About It?” *Child Trends Research Brief*, June 2002, at 1. This review does not compare outcomes for children raised by same-sex couples to outcomes for other children.
2. Wilcox, W. Bradford, *et al.* *Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. New York: Institute for American Values, 2005. Available at [HYPERLINK "http://www.americanvalues.org"](http://www.americanvalues.org) <http://www.americanvalues.org>.
3. Osgood, D. Wayne, and Jeff M. Chambers, “Social disorganization outside the metropolis: an analysis of rural youth violence,” 38 *Criminology* 81, 103 (2000).
4. Harper, Cynthia C., and Sara S. McLanahan, “Father Absence and Youth Incarceration,” 14(3) *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 369, 385-86 (2004).
5. Anderson, Amy L., “Individual and contextual influences on delinquency: the role of the single-parent family,” 30 *Journal of Criminal Justice* 575, 585 (2002).
6. *See also*, “Research does not generally support the idea that remarriage is better for children than living with a single mother.” Doherty, William J., *et al.*, *Why Marriage Matters: 21 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 5. New York City: Institute for American Values, 2002; McLanahan, Sara, and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Helps, What Hurts*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,

1994 (“In general, compared with children living with both their parents, young people from disrupted families are more likely to drop out of high school, and young women from one-parent families are more likely to become teen mothers, irrespective of the conditions under which they began to live with single mothers and irrespective of whether their mothers remarry or experience subsequent disruptions.”); Zill, Nicholas, *et al.*, “Long-term effects of parental divorce on parent-child relationships, adjustment, and achievement in young adulthood,” 7 *Journal of Family Psychology* 91 (1993) (“[T]here is no clear evidence that remarriage has a protective or ameliorative effect against the negative consequences of family discord and disruption”) (99); Lee, Valerie E., *et al.*, “Family structure and its effect on behavioral and emotional problems in young adolescents,” 4 *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 405, 429 (1994) (“Another finding we wish to highlight is the fact that eighth graders are at least as likely to experience problems as a result of living in households occupied by stepfamilies as in single-parent households.”); Jeynes, William H., “Effects of remarriage following divorce on the academic achievement of children,” 28 *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 385, 390 (1999) (“These findings do not support the assumption held by many educators that children of divorce from reconstituted homes are better off academically than children of divorce from single-parent homes. Remarriage following divorce *does not* positively affect academic achievement and may actually have a negative effect on academic achievement.”) (emphasis in original).

7. Nock, Steven, Affidavit, paragraph 3, in *Halpern v. Attorney General of Canada*, Case No. 684/00 (Ont. Sup. Ct. of Justice), available at

HYPERLINK

"[http://marriagelaw.cua.edu/Law/cases/Canada/ontario/halpern/aff\\_nock.pdf](http://marriagelaw.cua.edu/Law/cases/Canada/ontario/halpern/aff_nock.pdf)"

[http://marriagelaw.cua.edu/Law/cases/Canada/ontario/halpern/aff\\_nock.pdf](http://marriagelaw.cua.edu/Law/cases/Canada/ontario/halpern/aff_nock.pdf) (last visited March 31, 2005).

8. Meezan, William, and Jonathan Rauch, “Gay Marriage, Same-Sex Parenting and America’s Children,” 15(2) *Future of Children* 97, 104 (Fall 2005).

9. Caldwell, John C., and Thomas Schindlmayr, “Explanation of the Fertility Crisis in Modern Societies: A Search for Commonalities,” 57(3) *Population Studies* 241, 241 (2003). “Lowest low fertility” is often defined as a total fertility rate of 1.3 or less. Hans-Peter Kohler, *et al.*, “The Emergence of Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe During the 1990’s,” 28(4) *Population and Development Review*, 641, 641 (2002); Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision. Highlights* 4 (Table 2). New York: United Nations (February 26, 2003).

10. Joseph Chamie, “Low Fertility: Can Governments Make a Difference?” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Boston, Massachusetts (April 2, 2004).

11. For a discussion of theories (and an introduction to the literature on causes of low-fertility), *see* Caldwell, John C., and Thomas Schindlmayr, “Explanation of the Fertility Crisis in Modern Societies: A Search for Commonalities,” 57(3) *Population Studies* 241 (2003).

12. Festy, Patrick, “Looking for European Demography, Desperately?” Paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Policy Responses to Population Ageing and Population Decline in New York October 16-18, 2000, Population Division, Department of

Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations at 3 (2000). See also Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Secretariat, "Partnership and Reproductive Behavior in Low-Fertility Countries," *Population Newsletter* 74 (December 2002).

13. Witte, John Jr., "Propter Honoris Respectum: The Goods and Goals of Marriage," 76 *Notre Dame Law Review* 1019, 1035 (2001).

14. Abma, J., et al., "Fertility, Family Planning, and Women's Health: New Data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth," 23(19) *Vital Health Stat.* 28 (Table 17) (National Center for Health Statistics) (1997) (70.4 percent of births to married women were intended by both parents, compared to just 28 percent of births to unmarried mothers.).

15. *Id.* at 28 (Table 3) (finding 60.0% of women aged 35-39 had had at least one unintended pregnancy).

16. *Id.* at 28 (Table 3) (finding 38.1% of women aged 40-44 had had at least one unplanned birth).

17. Studies show that 2 out of 3 children born out of wedlock have nonresident fathers at birth. This percentage climbs as children grow older (though some couples eventually marry). See, e.g., McLanahan, et al., "Unwed Fathers and Fragile Families," Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #98-12 (March 1998) at 7. An Urban Institute policy brief explains the impact: "Parents who do not live with their children are unlikely to be highly involved in their children's lives." Sorensen, Elaine and Chava Zibman, *To What Extent Do Children Benefit from Child Support?* The Urban Institute, January 2000, at 8. According to the National Survey of America's Families, one in three (34%) children with a nonresident parent saw that parent on a weekly basis in 1997. Another 38 percent saw their nonresident parent at least once during the year, though not on a weekly basis. Fully 28 percent of children with a nonresident parent had no contact with that parent during the course of the year. *Id.* Another review of several national surveys found that, by their mothers' estimates, roughly 40% of children with nonresident fathers saw their father once a month, while nearly the same number did not see their father at all in a given year. Manning, Wendy D., and Pamela J. Smock, "New Families and Non-Resident Father-Child Visitation," 78(1) *Social Forces*, 87, 89 (Sept. 1999).

18. Jack Wertheimer, "Jews and the Jewish Birthrate," *Commentary* 120(3): (October 2005): 39-43:41.

19. Wertheimer, *Ibid.*

20. Three-quarters of the growth in conservative Christian denominations over more moderate or mainline denominations can be attributed to higher birth rates than mainline denominations. Hout, Michael, et al., "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology*, Sept. 2001 107(2); 458-500.

21. Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.

### ***Program Models***

*A Catholic Campaign for Children and Families.* A parish resource manual published by

the USCCB. Includes practical planning and support materials, clip art, bulletin quotes, liturgical and preaching guides, and models. For religious education programs, schools, family, and community programs. Order kit from USCCB Publications (no. 525-9; 88 pages; \$6.95).

*To Last a Lifetime.* Invite couples planning to marry to participate in a discussion about how to build and maintain a strong marriage. Show the 60-minute video “To Last a Lifetime” (discussion by four couples in Catholic marriage preparation) and follow with discussion. Video comes with a discussion guide. Order from USCCB Publications (no. 5-346; \$29.95).

*Family Commitment Prayer Cards.* Invite parish families to make a commitment to sharing the Good News and to be stewards of God’s gifts throughout the coming year. Distribute *Family Commitment Prayer Cards* to those families who do catechesis at home or give children enough copies for each member of their families to sign. *Family Commitment Prayer Cards* are available from USCCB Publishing, in English and Spanish. (Pkg. of 50 cards; \$7.50).

Make the vocation of marriage more visible—regularly include prayers for couples and families in the General Intercessions at Mass.

*Marriage Matters.* A Minnesota parish developed a program it calls *Marriage Matters*. To date they have organized the following: a babysitting co-op so couples can have a night out together; a mentoring system that matches older couples with younger ones; husbands and wives groups in which both work on how to be a better spouse, followed by each group consulting with the other; a monthly parish celebration for all the wedding anniversaries in any given month. (From “Supporting Marriages: A Parish Responsibility,” by H. Richard McCord, Jr. at [HYPERLINK](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/sacrament.shtml) "<http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/sacrament.shtml>" [www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/sacrament.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/sacrament.shtml)).

## ***Resources***

### *Teaching Documents*

*On the Family (Familiaris Consortio).* Pope John Paul II. Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publications (\$9.95). Also available at [HYPERLINK](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/index.htm) "[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/index.htm)" [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/index.htm). Click on “Apostolic Exhortations” and scroll down to *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981).

*On the Regulation of Birth.* Pope Paul VI, 1968. Available at [HYPERLINK](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/index.htm) "[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/index.htm)" [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/index.htm). Click on “Encyclicals” and scroll down to *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968).

### *Print*

*A Handbook for Parish Ministry with a Family Perspective.* Identifies the roles of priests, deacons, staff, volunteers and others in supporting families. Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publications (no. 337-X; \$4.95).

*The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better-Off Financially.* Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite. New York City: Random House, Inc., 2000 (\$14.95).

*Divided We Fall: Family Discord and the Fracturing of America.* Bryce J. Christensen. Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2005 (\$39.95).

*Do Mothers and Fathers Matter? The Social Science Evidence on Marriage and Child Well-Being.* Maggie Gallagher & Joshua K. Baker. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Marriage and Public Policy. Find at HYPERLINK "<http://www.imapp.org>" <http://www.imapp.org>, along with numerous policy briefs, news articles and commentary.

*In Love for Life!* A reflection on the conjugal, social and religious significance of marriage. Developed by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family in Canada. Available from: USCCB Publications (no. 475-6; \$8.95).

*Faithful to Each Other Forever.* A Catholic handbook of pastoral help for marriage preparation. Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publications (no. 252-7; \$22.95).

*Families, Marriage, and "De Facto" Unions.* Pontifical Council for the Family. Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publications (no. 5-410; \$5.95).

*How Cohabitation Differs from Marriage—The Facts.* Four-page fact sheet, with numerous references for further reading. Published by Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society (London). Find at HYPERLINK "<http://www.civitas.org.uk/hwu/cohabitation.php>" <http://www.civitas.org.uk/hwu/cohabitation.php>.

*The Meaning of Marriage.* Robert George and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2006 (\$29.95).

### *Internet*

HYPERLINK "<http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/index.shtml>" <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/index.shtml> USCCB Committee on Marriage and Family

HYPERLINK "<http://www.marriagedebate.com>" <http://www.marriagedebate.com> Institute for Marriage and Public Policy

HYPERLINK "http://www.profam.org" <http://www.profam.org> The Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society

HYPERLINK "http://www.familiausa.net" <http://www.familiausa.net> Familia offers study guides for small group discussion on the Church's teachings on marriage and family.

HYPERLINK "http://www.heritage.org/research/family/index.cfm" <http://www.heritage.org/research/family/index.cfm> Heritage Foundation's Family and Society Database of current research on family.

HYPERLINK "http://www.marriagesavers.com" <http://www.marriagesavers.com> Marriage Savers promotes strong marriages through church and community initiatives

HYPERLINK "http://www.retrouvaille.org" <http://www.retrouvaille.org> Retrouvaille offers a weekend (and follow-up) program to help couples strengthen their marriages.

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