

Decline of traditional marriage affects students' values, speakers say

WASHINGTON - The decline of traditional marriage in America continues to affect students' education and the future welfare of the Catholic Church, said a University of Virginia professor at a symposium at The Catholic University of America.

"The nation's retreat on marriage has made it difficult for many children and young adults to learn and live intellectual virtues that will allow them to pursue an academic vocation to the fullest," said W. Bradford Wilcox, associate professor of sociology and director of the National Marriage Project.

He spoke April 12 at one of a series of events sponsored by Catholic University in honor of President John Garvey's inauguration in January. The April 11-12 symposium was on how to apply intellect and virtue to campus life.

Along with Wilcox, speakers included Helen Alvare, associate professor of law at George Mason University; John Crosby, professor of philosophy at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio; and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler, assistant professor in the department of humanities and affiliate professor in the Villanova University School of Law.

Wilcox said universities need to do a better job of preparing students for marriage, "a vocation that goes right to the heart of the welfare and future of the Catholic Church."

Noting that although fewer Americans are getting married, divorce rates are much higher and cohabitation is on the increase around the world, marital happiness is surprisingly on the decline.

"The thought was if we made divorce easier from both a legal and normative perspective, then it would clear up all that dead wood, all those dead marriages," said Wilcox.

Students from unmarried families are prone to more drinking and “hooking up,” or engaging in casual sex, Wilcox said. He cited polling by sociologist Mark Regnerus, saying 40-60 percent of students report “hooking up” sometime in their college career.

Poor guidance about relationships on college campuses also affects education success, said Wilcox. He added that chaste women have fewer emotional problems and chaste men do better academically. Wilcox showed statistics reflecting that students who come from homes that are intact are more likely to graduate from high school and college.

He recommended colleges support single-sex dorms; make the sacraments readily available to students; and support student groups seeking to educate their peers about sex and marriage.

Crosby said one way Franciscan University of Steubenville supports chaste students is in households, fraternitylike communities centered on faith where students can pray, work and play together. He said it serves as an instrument of student evangelization.

Alvare said the Catholic Church has the advantage of many resources it can use to teach on sex, mating, marriage and procreation and universities should use them to prepare students for their vocations.

She said this is a time of experimental change in family law related to the separation of sex from parenting and parenting from marriage.

The creation of the birth control pill has been one of the most monumental technologies that has changed society, Alvare said. She added that the morning-after pill has become the symbol of freedom from childbearing, and an aid to equality between men and women when it comes to sexual freedom.

“Since the advent of this technology we actually have more out-of-wedlock pregnancies, more out-of-wedlock births, more abortions, more cohabitation, more divorce and sexually transmitted diseases,” said Alvare.

The government has set up programs encouraging sexual abstinence but still hands

out birth control, she continued, saying the attitude seems to be, “Let’s fix the symptoms but not get to the fundamental problem.”

Wilcox said the decline in traditional families is affecting the future of the Catholic Church, since the fortunes of the church in the U.S. rise and fall with the fortunes of the intact married family.

About 33 percent of the decline of churchgoers is related to family issues, he said. Sixty-two percent of married couples with children attend church at least twice a month, while only 14 percent of married couples without children go to church, he noted. And unmarried families with children rarely attend church.

“It’s just one more sign that marriage is losing its power to shape the lives of adults and kids in this country,” said Wilcox.