

Study confirms disconnect seen between marriage, parenthood

WASHINGTON - A survey released by the Pew Research Center shows a disconnect between marriage and parenthood, a trend Catholics involved in marriage and family ministry said they have observed over the past few decades.

H. Richard McCord, executive director of the Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the separation of marriage from parenthood has continued and intensified.

“That pattern is, in general, to understand marriage as a very private and individualized decision and lifestyle,” McCord said. “In other words, to see it largely as something that a couple chooses, and that choice is a choice that is theirs and theirs alone without too many other connections to other things, such as children.”

The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, self-described “fact tank,” surveyed more than 2,000 U.S. adults in 2007. Just 41 percent of the survey respondents said children are “very important” to a successful marriage.

The survey asked respondents whether a list of factors - including faithfulness, sharing household chores and adequate income - were very important, rather important or not very important for a successful marriage. In 1990, 65 percent of respondents said children were “very important” to a successful marriage.

In comparison to the 1990 study, the child factor showed the biggest change, falling to eighth out of nine factors on the list. McCord said he thinks the reason for this may lie in societal changes. Couples today approach marriage and childbearing as two separate decisions.

“In previous generations, these decisions were all seen as one single decision... getting married, having children,” McCord said. “But nowadays, those two decisions have become disassociated from one another.”

A higher percentage of Catholics said children were important to a successful marriage. The study showed that 48 percent of Catholics - and 68 percent of Hispanic Catholics - felt that children were "very important" to marriage. In comparison, 38 percent of white evangelical Protestants agreed.

Gail Risch, a researcher for the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., said she was not surprised by the findings. She said some of the results could be attributed to the increasing trend toward individualism in American society. And that mindset does not exclude Catholics, she said.

Risch referred to a recent Barna study, which showed Catholics have entered into mainstream America in terms of their socioeconomic status and their responses to the survey questions. The Barna Group in Ventura, Calif., has conducted and analyzed research to understand cultural trends since 1984.

Catholics are mainstream, Risch said, but they are also influenced by Catholic tradition, which accounts for the higher response to the question of the importance of children.

"They are not only hearing the Catholic tradition," Risch said. "They are also swimming in the midst of society."

And society promotes marriage as an individualized decision whose purpose is the happiness of the couple, McCord said. But, he said, according to Catholic beliefs, marriage has two interconnected purposes - the mutual love of the couple and the giving of life to a family.

This ideal of marriage is harder to achieve in reality, when child care responsibilities may infringe on the time a couple spends on their marriage, according to Mary Jo Pedersen, a marriage and family ministries specialist at the Family Life Office in the Archdiocese of Omaha.

When a new baby arrives, Pedersen said, marital satisfaction in most marriages dips because of the extra stresses the child puts on the relationship. To combat this dip, she said, parents should schedule a few hours every week to nurture their relationship.

Pedersen disagreed with the question asked in the survey and questioned why children are considered a “success factor” for marriage. The inquiry shouldn’t be “What does your child give to your marriage?” she said, but “What can your marriage give to your child?”

“We shouldn’t be saddling children with the responsibility to make their parents feel they are happy or successful,” she said. Children do at times make their parents happy and proud, she said, but the experience of raising a child can also be frustrating.

Pedersen quipped that some of the 2,000 people Pew called probably had 2-year-olds who had just had a temper tantrum as the phone rang. Children’s behaviors can be challenging to the couple’s relationship, causing a negative response to the question.

Aware of the challenges that face married couples and the frequency of divorce in today’s culture, the bishops’ conference recently encouraged parishes and dioceses to move marriage toward the top of the list of pastoral priorities, McCord said.

In November 2004, the bishops began the National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage to call attention to the value of married life which, McCord said, is the foundation of families and therefore the foundation of the church.

A Web site, www.foryourmarriage.org, gives suggestions about how couples can strengthen their marriage. Organizations like Retrouvaille and Marriage Encounter also offer married couples the tools to strengthen their marriage. And before the couple ties the knot, most Catholic churches require marriage preparation courses. Although it implied a separation of marriage from parenting and vice versa, the Pew research data shows children are still highly valued by their parents. In fact, 85 percent of adults surveyed ranked their relationship with their children above their relationship with their spouse, in terms of the happiness and personal satisfaction it brought them.

Risch said she was not surprised by that finding either.

“It’s easy for married couples to forget they have to work not only on parenting, but

on their relationship,” she said. So caring for children comes first, and caring for the family is moved to “the back burner.”

McCord said he hopes the church’s marriage initiative will give couples the tools they need to make their marriage last a lifetime, whether they have children or not.