

We need families

By Christopher Gunty

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Way back in 1986, St. John Paul II spoke of the family as the “first and vital cell of society” during a homily in Perth, Australia. More recently, during a radio interview while he was in Brazil for World Youth Day, Pope Francis said, “Without the family, the cultural survival of the human race would be at risk. The family, whether we like it or not, is the foundation.”

Yet, we all know that many things these days affect family life in a way that do not help, but hinder this foundation. In that same homily, John Paul noted, “As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live.” Where the family is falling apart, chances are our communities and our countries are not doing any better.

Some of those threats to the family weigh in on the negative side of the ledger. Domestic violence harms families in ways that sometimes cannot be fathomed by those who live in a loving relationship. In these cases, the very unit that should uplift and support the family is instead torn apart by verbal and physical abuse of a spouse or the children. Instead of being embraced in a loving, compassionate environment, those in danger of abuse are threatened. Agencies and programs exist all around our archdiocese to help those in need.

Much attention has been called to the situation of divorced Catholics, especially those who have remarried without an annulment of the first marriage. Canon law says that these folks are not eligible to receive Communion. Some are confused about church teaching. Many don’t attend church at all, since they feel left out of the Eucharist, which is supposed to nourish us spiritually. Some attend church, but feel a great sense of loss at Communion time, since they cannot join fully with the community in receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. Pope Francis seems to indicate that he wishes for a more pastoral approach to this matter. Just this week, he established a new Vatican commission which “will have as its goal to prepare a proposal of reform of the matrimonial process, with the objective of simplifying its procedure, making it more streamlined, and safeguarding the principle of the indissolubility of matrimony,” according to a Vatican statement Sept. 20.

Some marriages become a bit, well, boring. Life is busy, life is hectic, and that can lead to spouses taking each other for granted, and forgetting what drew them together when they were courting and love was so fresh. After a while, especially when there are children involved who have school events and after-school sports, the couple can lose sight of their unique position as the ministers and recipients of

the sacrament of marriage. Several parishes in the archdiocese address this concern with marriage enrichment seminars, date nights and spiritual and emotional support for married couples. You don't have to be in a bad or crumbling marriage to want more out of your relationship with your spouse.

The U.S. bishops' conference has a website to celebrate and support marriages. ForYourMarriage.org has resources to lift up married couples. There, for example, you can get daily tips for strengthening your relationship, such as this one from Sept. 22: "Don't complain about anyone or anything today, even if it's legitimate. A non-complaining/whining spouse is nicer to be around. Maybe you can hold off complaining for two days. ..."

Marriage is important - to families, to society and especially to the couple. The Synod on the Family beginning in a couple weeks in Rome, as well as the World Meeting of Families slated for Philadelphia in fall 2015 give us a chance to do a kind of SWOT analysis on the family - what are the strengths and weaknesses? What are the opportunities to improve families, and what threatens their continued health? We need answers, because strong marriages are vital to our community and the world.

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