

Influence of Family in Raising the Next Generation:

Keynote address By Msgr. Matthew Hassan KUKAH at the 8th Doha Conference for Interfaith Dialogue, October 19th-21st, 2010.

A greater sense of intergenerational solidarity is urgently needed. Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources. "We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries; for this reason we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family"

My job has been made easy by the caliber of people that this Conference has assembled. I notice that themes to be covered include *Family, Education, Modern Technology and Worship*. The challenge of raising the next generation is a challenge over the future of humanity. There is the old time tested saying that *the children are the future of tomorrow*. Another wise saying claims that: *Today is the tomorrow we dreamt of yesterday*. So, in this regard, our children should be seen as a mirror of what our society should aspire to in future. What we make of them today, is what tomorrow will be.

In this keynote address, I will divide this paper into Four Sections. Section 1 will try to clarify what the concepts mean by way of our ordinary dictionary understanding. Section 2 will address the issues of the challenges that families face today in seeking to raise the next generation. Section 3 will look at the opportunities that lie in effectively raising the next generation. Finally, by way of conclusion, in Section 4, I will analyse the implications of raising the next generation in the age of globalization.

1: The Family and the Next Generation: Some Definitions and Clarifications:

According to the New Oxford Dictionary, Family is defined as: *a group consisting of parents and children living together in a household; a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage*: But in terms of every day usage, the word has been expanded to accommodate other dimensions of various networks of relationships. Thus, it is common to hear people speak of a complete outsider as member of our family. This does not necessarily mean blood relationships but it one way of saying that some level of intimacy has developed in someone's relationship with a family. On the strength of that relationship, he or she is now considered part of that family's inner circle. We often hear words like *family name, family honour, family tree, family values, family love etc*. This does not denote another definition of family, but it is more an expression of aggregate definitions of attitudes, that bolster and ennoble family life and family cohesion.

On the word Generation, the same dictionary defines it as; *all of the people born and*

¹ Pope Benedict XVI: World Day of Peace Message, January 2007.

living at about the same time, regarded collectively the average period, generally considered to be about thirty years, during which children are born and grow up, become adults, and begin to have children of their own. In its elastic form, we now hear of such expressions as *generation gap* (explaining the attitudinal differentiation in groups based on age differences), *generation X*, an expression used to those who were born in the 60s. They represent the generation that idolized the Beatles, adored drugs and encouraged some very loose lifestyles which came to be known as the *hip culture*.

2: The Challenges of Family Today and the Next Generation:

In his essay, *The Great Disruption*, Francis Fukuyama has argued that.....*The other major social change that has led to traumatic life experiences has been the rise of divorce and family breakdown. Commonsensically, one would think that children who have experienced the divorce of their parents, or have had to deal with a series of boyfriends in a single-parent household, would tend to become cynical about adults in general, and that this might go far toward explaining the increased levels of distrust that show up in survey data.*

The notion of Family is coming under very severe strain today due to many factors. Globalisation has thrown up so many challenges, but by itself, it is not a cause of the problems. Globalisation is so forceful that despite the criticism, arresting its impact is akin to trying to cover the sun with our hands. However, to follow the imagery of the sun, we can argue that even if we cannot stop its heat, we can at least find either an umbrella or a shade to shelter us from its excesses. Traditional definitions of family have been subjected to various changes with time. It has always been the traditional understanding based on both irrespective of what one believed that the word Family meant a man, his wife and children. But recent developments have placed these notions under strain. Single parenthood is seen by many now as a choice. Lesbianism and homosexuality have now thrown new challenges. Backed by Legislation in the European Union and some parts of the United States, the notion of same sex marriages and is now on the front burner. The international campaign for rights in the areas of housing, taxation, adoption etc, are changing and challenging the face of Family as we know it. But there are other immediate problems even within what one might call the normal family settings. They pose serious problems for how we think about the future generation. It is to these that we shall now turn.

First is Abortion. Today, many forces, from war, disease, pestilence, disaster to hunger, have imperil human life. Abortion, the killing of innocent life has now been incorporated into the basket of rights to the extent that women see it as an expression of their personal freedom. The influence of feminism, increasing secularization and attempts to limit the role of Religion, came to a climax with the Beijing Conference. Now, women see abortion as a right. This is surely the greatest threat to the human family and it is also at the heart of what how any society negotiates the future. Family planning, the spacing of children is desirable, but care

must be taken in areas of proper education.

Secondly, is Euthanasia, another life taking strategy. Unable to see human suffering as an act of God and part of His divine will, human beings are now taking it upon themselves to terminate the lives of those they consider to be in grave pain. Similarly, with new technology, some women are now prepared to terminate the lives of their foetuses on the grounds that scans have shown that they are of the wrong gender or that they have some physical disabilities.

Third, is the role of profession and career for women. With more and more women getting education and turning to professions, specializing as Engineers, Doctors, Lawyers, there are fears that this is posing a danger to the family. When husband and wife have to work, something sometimes has to give and often it is the attention to the children. Women are now being called into public life some as Politicians and others as Ministers and so on. Managing these challenges demands clear policies that take cognizance of the great role that women can, and must play in society. A proper management of this challenge can lead to a more creative and caring society. There are many other challenges but these are enough to illustrate our point.

3: Opportunities for the Family and the next generation:

Fear, suspicion, doubts and anxieties often attend our inter generational discourse. One generation fears that the other generation does not appreciate or understand its yearnings and goals in life. One generation often thinks that the next generation will destroy the legacy that they have built. The younger generation believes that the old generation is old fashioned and don't understand the modern ways. Parents are often nostalgic about the *good old days*. Usually, those *good old days* are often our own days. The days we were in University, those days when there was order, when children obeyed their parents, those days when we trekked to schools, those days when there was no electricity and so on. Now, we often say, our children have become stubborn, they talk back at their parents, they are experimenting with dangerous drugs, the media has become their new gods, they are only interested in partying, they dress in provocative ways. Parents worry that their children are abandoning their spiritual heritage. They are marrying people of different faiths, races, nationalities and tongues. Naturally these developments breed fear and anxiety. However, with more and more young men and women traveling and studying or working away from home, parents must be prepared to overcome these fears and look at the opportunities that lie ahead.

First, the great progress in the area of medicine and science has continued to offer the world new opportunities of ensuring the survival of humanity. In the wake of earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, epidemics, wars and so on, these advances have helped humanity recover and sustain itself. Therefore, a major advantage that our generations have is that advances in science are leading to safer births, healthier children and longevity.

Secondly, the availability of learning aids and new technologies like the Computer have now made learning easier for our children. It is not uncommon to discover that today, in most families, it is the five-year-olds who are the wizards and the unpaid resident IT consultants of the mobile phone technology for their parents. This generation therefore has greater potential to really dream big.

Thirdly, there are the prospects offered by the media. The main challenge of course remains managing and effectively using these opportunities well. Parents often lament that the minds of our children are being poisoned by the media especially the electronic Media and the Internet. But it is important to note that we are not totally hopeless and helpless in using these to nurture and guide the next generation. We can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the relevant regulatory agencies to ensure the screening of what our children can access in the media. We shall hear more of this as the Conference unfolds.

4: Summary and Conclusion:

We have tried to argue in this paper that the family is the epicenter of society. Its survival is the precondition for the continued survival of humanity. Therefore, its stability is the only guarantee of human solidarity. In concluding these comments therefore, I wish to identify a few pointers which I hope will be addressed more comprehensively in the papers by the various experts.

First, the Family as a unit can be treated from the point of view of Religion or Sociology. We must however see the family from the point of view of God's plans for the human race. And, if we are children of the same God, then our aim and hopes should be to create a human family beyond our immediate family, community or sovereign state. What we need therefore is to seek greater harmony and world peace as the ultimate legacy for the next generation. With all its limitations, the United Nations remains the most visible expression of this solidarity. With all its weaknesses, it is important that the institution be supported.

Secondly, there is the issue of Family history and its implications for the future. Today, the world is caught up in a web of bitterness and hatred as a result of distorted views of perceived and alleged historical injustices among communities and nations. Our societies are endangered by certain grievances which we continue to transmit from one generation to the other. Countries must learn to create coherent accounts of history that focus on shared values.

Three, Religion is a vital tool for ensuring family cohesion. Globalisation has broken down barriers and the movement of humanity has created new challenges for the world. We must collectively ensure the respect and dignity of all believers irrespective of their faith. What is important is to put in place a legal system that ensures religious liberty and the rights of Minorities. In many nations, believers still treat those outside their faith with deep suspicion. At a time when political and economic interests are helping people to build bridges, at a time when

intermarriages have reduced racism and bigotry, we believers must do more to show the way by tolerance and accommodation.

Four, increasing secularism is posing a threat to the family due to its corrosive influence on public morality. Religion and religious values are the sole antidote to secularism. Without a clear template of public morality, our societies might return to what Hobbes referred to as the **state of nature** where, in his words, life was *nasty, brutish and short*. An appeal to our collective sense of universal solidarity is inevitable because, as Pope Benedict XVI said: *Universal solidarity represents a benefit as well as a duty. This is a responsibility that present generations have towards those of the future, a responsibility that also concerns individual States and the international community.....In addition to a fairer sense of intergenerational solidarity there is also an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of intragenerational solidarity, especially in relationships between developing countries and highly industrialized countries*²

Fifthly, the Family is where our children, the future generation can experience Love, Trust, Respect, Honour, Integrity etc. It is where they first experience the art of giving and tolerance. This is why we must do everything possible to ensure its security and protection from the vagaries and excesses of daily life. This is why Divorce and single parenthood must never be projected as the ideal.

Finally, let me end on a personal note. I wish to thank the organisers of this Conference for inviting me. I commend the Government and people of Qatar for their exemplary openness and hospitality. This small country is gradually emerging as a magnet for the kind of spirit of openness that will drive away fear, ensure human growth and development.

I still have very fond memories of my visit here in 2004 at the invitation of your Emir. I came as a member of the Vatican Delegation from the Council for Interreligious Dialogue. I recall the day that a piece of land was generously allocated for the building of a Catholic Church here. I also still have very fond memories of my visit to Al Jazeera, the television station that is now a reference point for objectivity and his professionalism. Following in the tradition of the country, their openness to new ideas has made them one of the most important voices today.

We hope that in 2022, the world will assemble here to celebrate the great festival of the World Cup. I pray your country wins its bid. Thank you for your kind attention.

² Pope Benedict XVI: World Day of Peace Message (2007).