

PUBLIC LIVES

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Family size

I belong to a brood of thirteen children. Maybe I can speak with some authority about the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in a large family. It was fun, but it was very hard. It took a while for me to erase the blind impress of past deprivations. Except for my brother the priest, we are all today married and have children of our own. None of us however has more than four, and our average family size is less than three. In itself, having more children is neither good nor bad. A lot depends on what your goals and priorities are, and how you manage the situation.

My father was a lawyer who spent almost his entire professional life working as a public prosecutor. He was uncompromising about honesty and integrity. He was a proud person and asked for no help from his rich father. Because we were many, we never had enough of anything except each other's company. We learned early what it meant to scrimp, to be content, to share, and to wait for one's turn. My mother showed us how: she never sat down to take her own meal until all of us had eaten. She taxed her ingenuity to stretch every peso my father took home from his meager government salary. But what a bright human being she was! If she had not become a housewife, she would have built a business empire of her own. Yet she chose to define her fulfillment in how well she raised her children.

Growing up as the eldest, I often wished that we were rich, or there were not so many of us. Even in the 1950s, when family planning was not yet common, having more than ten children was viewed with wonderment. My father used to tell his friends, "It's cheaper by the dozen." I think he meant that only in jest. I am not sure if he and

my mother really intended to have thirteen. Today, as I recall my parents' struggle to feed, clothe, nurture, educate, and discipline their huge brood, I can only stand in awe of what they did. They literally gave up their own lives so we could have ours. They forsook luxury and focused on the essentials. My father continued to take public transport even after he was appointed first assistant city fiscal of Manila. He never got to travel. He died when he was barely sixty.

My parents are both gone now. But the memory of their love and steadfastness pulls us together. We their children have kept tight bonds to one another, rejoicing in each other's achievements and offering these to our parents in tribute. We continue to share, and we have carried over to adulthood a system for resolving misunderstandings and differences. We place great value on relationships more than on material possessions. Because my parents left hardly any property over which to fight, kinship is all we have. To us it is priceless.

Modern society erodes the value of kinship as a determinant of individual success. This is inevitable, and is consistent with the rules of a democratic society. But it would be a mistake to equate this with the decline of the family as a social unit. On the contrary, when the family sheds off the practical or material advantages it traditionally confers on its members, the deep love and intimacy that the family alone can offer will have a better chance to flourish.

It was traditional society that regarded the family with an instrumentalist outlook. Marriages among the elite were usually contracted with an eye to forging political, business, or clan alliances. Children were brought out into the world either completely without a thought, or deliberately in order to raise a successor or an inheritor to a fortune, or to breed more farm hands. It wasn't common to treasure children for the sheer joy they bring, or as a vital link to the chain of generations in whose development parents feel an enormous responsibility.

In the context of these reflections, I find it truly unfortunate that the whole idea of planning a family tends to be reduced to whether or not to actively promote and subsidize the use of artificial contraceptives. When the question is framed this way, it is the incidental issues that catch first attention – e.g., are we not building a “contraceptive” culture that promotes promiscuity?

It seems to me more productive for everyone to start on shared ethical ground – that the development of the family as the basic unit of society is a collective responsibility that we must urgently and sensibly attend to in the light of the many challenges posed by human survival and growth in the modern age. This principle is enshrined in our constitution. It is a value that religious leaders and legislators cite as a common premise in justifying their often contrasting positions on the issue. Still, family planning is little understood by those who are expected to practice it. It continues to be erroneously equated only with contraception.

The goal of family planning is typically defined as follows: To provide the information and means that couples need so that the number of children they bear is consistent with the number of children they desire. This definition assumes that Filipino couples actually pause to decide how many children they want to have. My view is that the majority don't. Children in our society happen; they are usually not planned for. I think that planning a family means, in the first instance, understanding one's role and responsibility in reproduction. There are no formal schools for parents, and yet increasingly parenting can no longer be left to chance.

A primary goal on which Church and State can agree is to instill reproductive consciousness and responsibility in couples. That, to me, sums up the main battle for the “right” family size.

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