**The Stress of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

*“Raising children is sacred work.”*

We may expect to hear this in a homily, read it in an encyclical, or learn it from our own parents.

Instead, this declaration can be found in the opening pages of a frightening, newly-released U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf> Titled *“Parents Under Pressure,”* this advisory shares such sobering findings such as:

* 41% of parents claim that “most days they are so stressed they cannot function.”
* 66% of parents “feel[] consumed” by financial worries.
* Compared to 1985, mothers have increased their hours of paid employment by 28% and fathers by 4% while, during the same time, mothers have increased their “primary child care” time by 40% and fathers by 154%. (Yet, somehow, the number of hours in the day remains 24!)
* In 2021, 65 % of parents reported that they “experienced loneliness.” This figure jumped to 77% of single parents.
* Concerns about social media and widespread technology use drive 70% of parents to say that their role is “more difficult” than merely two decades ago.

The immediate response to this report prompted, from some, predictable calls for rapidly expanded public financial assistance to parents. From others, it prompted equally predictable calls for parents to “step-up” and cope with the demands that are simply part and parcel of parenthood.

Yet, neither of these responses fully acknowledges that *“raising children is sacred work.”* It is not merely important or necessary. It is *“sacred.”*

Political debates will continue to rage and social scientists will have much to explore as they delve into the implications of this dismal report on parental stress. However, their best efforts will fall short in a world that seems to have forgotten the very sacredness of raising children. This world can too easily forget that in raising children, men and women are cooperating in a holy way with the God who entrusted their children to them.

The Catholic tradition of subsidiarity posits that there is an entire array of institutions between self and state that, at their best, offer support to those who need assistance. In a society where too many do not know their neighbors, where community organizations collapse for lack of members, and harried, hurried people no longer socialize, isolation and loneliness should not be surprising. In an era where families are smaller and more far flung, the comforting proximity of extended family may not be as reliable. In the social media landscape where “friends” and “followers” are just as likely to be judges and competitors rather than true supporters, it is not shocking to find a gap between what stressed parents may need and what they may have.

Perhaps, then, this is a time to consider how our faith communities – our churches, parish schools, Catholic universities, and hospitals, to name a few – may respond to the frightening findings of this report. This could be a time to ask if, in all that we do, we mean what we say when we proclaim that *“raising children is sacred work.”*

Do our parishes welcome noisy, squirming children and offer opportunities for parents to meet with each other? Do we – on days other than Mother’s Day and Father’s Day – thank the parents in our parishes for the important work they do? Do our parish schools offer parents a genuine sense of community? Is there a place for honest conversations about social media and its demands, or do our communities inadvertently encourage competition? How well do we support parents in our midst who are caring for children with special needs, meeting simultaneous demands of elder care and child care, or facing the heartbreak of divorce, death of a spouse, or other crisis? Are parish activities scheduled to make it possible for parents to attend, or are they just another way in which parents may be isolated from their fellow parishioners?

When we talk to each other, do we speak with as much admiration for hard working parents as we do of those who labor in the paid workplace and enjoy professional success? Do we help parents raise their children in faith by parish traditions that may become part of family life? Do we encourage intergenerational connections so that young parents can be guided by those who have gone before, and so that those who have hard-won wisdom are able to share it with others? Are there ways in our parishes where we explicitly pray for parents as they live their vocation, often in difficult situations?

*“Parents Under Pressure”* does not lend itself to easy or simplistic solutions. Yet, it is worth reading and, more so, worth praying about. In a Church that has long proclaimed that *“raising children is sacred work,”* there may be a uniquely special place to respond, with love, to mothers and fathers living with the stress of ordinary time.

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