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ALTERNATIVES TO THE FAMILY

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A family begins with the Sacrament of Marriage, in which the spouses give themselves to one another and actually accept one another, promising life-long fidelity, love and respect, in good times and in bad. When this promise is exchanged, the spouses also commit themselves in a certain sense to their children. Indeed, the promise of the reciprocal fidelity is also made to them. The children will rely on it and, from the experience they have of its daily and preserving observation, they will learn what it means truly to love one another and how much joy can be found in mutual and unreserved self-giving.

- John Paul II, “*Te Deum*” Homily at St. Ignatius Church, Rome, 31 December 1995.¹



ONE STRIKING WAY FOR ME TO BEGIN THIS REFLECTION ON ALTERNATIVES TO the family is to recall that I myself live in one of the classical “alternatives” to the family. The clerical life is an alternative life to the family. It is not, be it noted, a rejection of the family, as if the family were somehow a flawed institution, nor is it a replacement of it. Without families, clerical life cannot exist. But the clerical or monastic life is a choice not to live in the basic domestic institution. The new recruits to monasteries or convents do not arrive as natural offspring, as with the family.

Thus, I suggest that there is nothing wrong with the family, nor is there anything disordered about clerical or monastic life because it is different from the family. Indeed, rightly is it said that unless the clerical life is in order, the family life is likely to be in disorder. Too frequently, the corruption of family life historically follows from the corruption of clerical or monastic life or from the corruption of the intellectual life in general. Disordered dons lead to disordered hearths.

The monastic way of life—common life, common brotherhood, common property—is then an exceptional life; it is not for everyone.² It is not a substitute for or protest against the family, but rather something else, a way of reminding us that the manner of life of the family itself reaches towards something beyond itself. The monastic life, however, is dependent on family life. Monastic life, as I mentioned; does not naturally reproduce itself. It requires both grace and will. We can have family life without monastic life, but we cannot have monastic life without family life. The monastic life is a graced form of the celibate life, to be lived within very carefully defined terms. There are eunuchs from nature, those who have made themselves so, and those who are so for the Kingdom of God, as Scripture tells us.

To broach this topic in another way, let me recall a theological problem I once came across in *Peanuts*, in a question that Linus asked of the ever blunt Lucy. I believe, as a matter of fact, that the only case in which Linus’ ques-

tion was in fact ontologically correct was in the case of the Holy Family, but Linus' question, as we shall see, has vast implications. The scene begins with Lucy pertly sitting in front of the television set with the most serious of looks on her face. Linus comes up behind her and says, as if asking her permission, "I have a question." Lucy moves nary a muscle. Linus is next seen by himself, arms in the air with a statement of utmost earnestness on his face. He asks Lucy, staring indifferently into the television set, "What would happen if there were a beautiful and highly intelligent child up in heaven waiting to be born, and his or her parents decided that the two children they already had were enough?" Such is the moral condition of our polity that Charles Schulz may have been the only theologian among us brave enough to voice such a question.

In the third scene, both Linus and Lucy gaze into the television set. She answers him off-handedly and impatiently, "Your ignorance of theology and medicine is appalling." In the fourth scene, Lucy continues unchanged before the television set. Linus turns away, with a look of lingering perplexity on his face, and says, to himself but out loud, "I still think it's a good question." Indeed it is a good question, one almost prohibited from being seriously posed except in comic strips.

Lucy is right, of course; we Christians do not believe in preexistence and reincarnation of souls as the explanation of reality; we do believe in the resurrection of the body, the reunification of the whole person, body and soul. We hold that body and soul are created from nothing, but that the soul survives death, is immortal. It is, however, always intrinsically related to the body. To postulate "pre-existing children" is, in fact, ignorant theology, as Lucy maintains. And medically, as John Paul II keeps telling us, we begin from the first moment of conception; we do not linger in heaven waiting to be born, unlike the Creator capable of bringing us into being who simply exists.

Science and the Pope say the same thing. Yet we do know that the enormous, astronomical multiplicity of ova and spermatozoa present in human sexual exchange

indicates the possibility of vast numbers of other children that "might" have been conceived but were not. Evidently, our particular existence was actualized while other possible human existences were not. We have to wonder, why? In this sense, Linus' question is a legitimate one.



Linus and Lucy

Linus is right in another fashion; parents can be selfish, can prevent what perhaps ought to exist, from coming to be, such is their power. Linus' question is a good one with which to begin; we may wonder whether parents always accomplish what they ought to do, and wonder about what happens, if not to possible, not-yet-existing souls, at least to the myriad of fetuses with definite souls who are conceived but not born, either because of natural deformities or because of abortion. These already incipient lives are each destined to life with God, just like any other human being. Likewise, all children born of aberrant beginnings, whether from personal disorder in the lives of their parents, say adultery, or from scientific experimentation, are destined to the same eternal end. The Church's teaching is quite clear on this point.

In the case of the Incarnation of Christ, the one case in which Linus' question does in fact apply, the Word to be made flesh is from eternity. The Church has always taught that this event in our redemption did depend on Mary's will, her acceptance of Gabriel's request, her "be it done unto me according to they word." The Word in heaven, to be sure, did not have a pre-existing human soul or body. Christ's human soul is created just like everyone else's. But the Word did exist, the Second Person of the Trinity. In this sense, Linus' question has an uncannily perceptive truth connected with it.

II

The best book on the family in the twentieth century was written near its beginning, in 1910, by G. K. Chesterton. The book was called, appropriately, *What's Wrong with the World*. The book's title was not posed in the form of a question. It argued that what is wrong with the world relates directly to how we think of man, woman, child, of home and work. If we get these things wrong, the world will go wrong. Families at the end of this cen-

ture are, by every testimony, in much worse condition as families than they were at the beginning of the century, mostly because they have rejected one after another the principles that ground the dignity of the family, principles that Chesterton carefully spelled out in his own memorable fashion. Things did go wrong. We might have assumed, of course, that, as we became richer, our families would become more stable and healthy. The very opposite seems to be the case. We did become economically richer and our family life came under concentrated attack; its cohesive principles were everywhere rejected or not practiced. We have sought to justify and live with the alternate principles that would substitute for the family. The fact that these substitutes do not work should cause us again to wonder why.

To comprehend the meaning of the family and its alternatives, we need to indulge in some real “free thinking.” Chesterton remarked in *What’s Wrong with the World*, that “the only true freethinker is he whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past. He cares as little for what will be as for what has been; he only cares for what ought to be.”³ This last “care” of the truly free thinker, the thinker free from all fads and prejudices, that is, the care for what ought to be, is of course the first requirement. But we cannot ask what ought to be without also thinking about what ought not to be. Both what ought to be and what ought not to be exist among us. Things that ought not to be, like adultery or divorce, do exist, a perplexing fact that requires us both to correct what ought not to be and to find ways to deal with the good that supports the reality of what ought to be.

What ought to be, when examined or seen in isolation by itself, does not always seem so majestic, so rare, so logical, or so coherent. Those in the best circumstances often do not know that they are in the best circumstances; they may have nothing with which to compare themselves. We begin by comparing the best circumstances—the sort of life we would want if we could have it with the alternatives that we have chosen but perhaps do not want. With this comparison, we begin to suspect that what ought to be is in fact much better than what we have put in its place. The penalty for not living the good life is, in truth, precisely the not living the good life, the carrying out of our faulty choices in reality. Once we have made certain choices, we must live out to the end what we select in place of the good. The first step in restoring the good is to acknowledge the disorder. This sets the groundwork for any forgiveness by reestablish-

ing the right understanding of what is good in the first place.

The best way to understand the importance of the family is to spell out, in all their spectacular variety, the alternatives to this same family. This is, as it were, an intellectual exercise, worthy of pursuit if only more clearly to see the issues before us. Let us, if we can, in logical and inter-related order, see just what might replace the family. The place to begin, however, is with the family itself, at its best, so that we will have something with which to contrast it. Both philosophy and experience have given us many alternatives to the family, alternatives that we can either actually see or easily imagine.

In beginning with the family at its best, I do not mean that such a family as I shall describe exists or exists often. We are a fallen race. We know that the fact that we do not observe the Commandments, for example, does not mean that there is something wrong with the Commandments. The fact that we do not observe the Commandments means rather that the Commandments give us a pretty good idea of what we ought to do. We would not be better off if we encouraged everyone to go about breaking them, doing what is opposite to their injunctions.



III

Let me begin, then, with what ought to be. I am going to proceed from both, the revelational and philosophical traditions. What is it, in other words, that any human child, in love and justice, ought to be able to expect? At the very least, a child should be born of a sufficiently mature and responsible father and mother who are formally married to one another, who love one another, who want and will to accept children begotten of them, to care for them, raise them, and educate them. The spouses’ faithful love and intercourse alone should be the proper way in which a child ought to be conceived. This father and this mother intend to stay together until death do them part. Their love in its mysterious unity and diversity is the proper environment—indeed the *only* proper environment—in which a child should be conceived and born, and in which he can flourish. The child needs

both father and mother willing to exercise that sacrificial love with which Christ has loved us. Here, I am not saying that such a relation always, or even often, exists. I only say that this is what we would want ourselves for ourselves if we could have it.

We hear much talk of “family planning,” but no child as such, in his particularity, is properly speaking “planned.” Parents, a husband and a wife, do not know whether they will in fact conceive. If they are, through some physical defect, totally lacking the organs of reproduction, they cannot even marry. Marriage implies at minimum the capacity to perform the marital act. And when they do conceive, parents have no idea how they caused the particularity of this child that turns out to be Suzy or Sam. Parents only know that what is begotten of them is theirs and that their continued relationship is the primary one that provides the child the proper opportunity to grow to adulthood in their care.

A man and a woman also know that the very possibility of a child is not something that they somehow make up themselves. Their capacities are given by nature. Man and man, woman and woman, cannot conceive, cannot marry, cannot indulge in any act that will result in a child. This is by nature. Such same-sex relationships are intrinsically “in vain,” designed for nothing, to use Aristotle’s phrase. A civil law permitting such a relationship does not change the fact that the relationship is “in vain,” has no natural purpose.

Conception is what can and sometimes does happen when human beings of opposite sexes unite in a particular act of intercourse. Since each person, husband and wife, is a rational being, each should know what each is doing, what happens between them. The openness to life is what guarantees the uniqueness of the relation of man and woman in marriage and makes it different from all other relationships. The Church, interestingly enough, will not allow as morally right any other form of human begetting except that between wedded man and woman in a proper act of intercourse between them in the context of their marriage.⁴ What the Church is protecting is precisely the relation of marriage to child, through protecting the exclusiveness of the relationship of husband and wife. Any scientific infertility programs to aid in conception must retain these two purposes, the exclusive marital relationship and its relationship to begetting. Human life is never for experimentation, either at the level of the couple or that of the child. Experiments to aid

fertility are only legitimate when they fulfill the purposes and integrity of the act itself in some remedial fashion.

We can acknowledge, of course, that today very few children are born in such conditions in which they are begotten in a stable and loving family that has accepted as a principle its permanence through openness to life. We know of divorce and its frequency. We know of adoption, of foster homes, of orphanages. We know about abortion. We have heard of frozen embryos. We have also probably heard of polygamy or even polyandry. Certainly we have heard of *in vitro* fertilization, sperm banks, and surrogate motherhood. We know scientists who would like to monitor full human fertilization and gestation outside the womb of the mother, as if scientific knowledge were itself a sufficient reason to attempt these things, as if individual human lives can be sacrificed to some higher knowledge. We can classify these alternate relationships from the aspect of the act of begetting or from the aspect of the child once begotten.

Scientific conceptions of human generation are based on a separation of child begetting and the intercourse of its genetic parents. Intercourse is to be left to the couples provided that they beget nothing, whereas actual begetting is to be turned over to science. Ova and sperm are collected outside of intercourse. The “contraceptive mentality,” the absolute separation of intercourse from the openness to conceiving life, has this in common with the scientific project: the separation of begetting from intercourse and its conditions. That is to say, we have heard of many differing situations in which children can be and are begotten, can be and are cared for. We can acknowledge that the begetting of children as the initial step in human life is performed under a number of differing conditions. We want to inquire about what is the best condition and, when this best is not fulfilled, what happens to human life; what do the alternatives, in other words, entail?

One thing to remember, however, is that the Commandment, “thou shalt not commit adultery,” does not mean, should a child be conceived in such a relationship, or in a scientific or other morally disordered manner, that the begotten child as such is evil, that it should be destroyed or even be unwanted. Any begotten child, as the Holy Father remarks, has rights, is the object of duties of others to its well-being. We generally accept that a child without known and acknowledged parents will have no natural protector. It needs to find one in law and char-

ity. This principle that the begotten child is good even if the means of begetting it were disordered—likewise holds for human children produced in scientific laboratories of unknown or unacknowledged parentage. On the other hand, such a situation cannot help but mean, by its very circumstances, that the child so conceived was not placed in the best circumstances for it to grow and flourish. The object of begetting a child is the child itself, not some scientific or human purpose aside from the child's good. There is a consequence to personal disorder of soul that directly affects the begotten child, with his natural right to two parents in a condition to take care of him. Such is our intimate relationship with one another that our aberrations touch more than ourselves, even when we admit to the disorder we caused.

IV

Besides in fornication or in adultery, children can be begotten in institutions of polygamy and polyandry, which assume normal acts on the begetting side of the relationship. These latter are historically legal or customary institutions, having the stability that the previous two relationships, fornication and adultery, generally lack. The notion that so-called “unwanted children” can be aborted, incidentally, is often the direct consequence of a lack of any real sense of commitment that is endemic to these two usually passing relationships (adultery and fornication), or else it is a kind of revenge that an anticipated permanence was betrayed. The traditional objection to polyandry, one woman married to several men, was that there was uncertainty of fatherhood. A woman with several legal husbands would, presumably, unless carefully monitored, not be sure which child belonged to which father. The certainty of parental line would be obscured. Behind this objection is the assumption that certainty of parenthood is itself a good that belongs to the child's general good.

Polygamy was practiced in Old Testament times and elsewhere throughout history and exists even today. Muslim law, I believe, allows four wives. Many still argue that the Reynolds decision of the U. S. Supreme Court, outlawing polygamy among the Mormons, was an unjust decision. That is, they would argue that polygamy is a good institution. In polygamy, fatherhood is certain; but with a multiplicity of wives, there is a multiplicity of

half brothers and sisters. This system obviously dilutes the meaning of fatherhood and the capacity of fathers to give personal attention to their children; it is also unjust to the various wives and children.

In the cases of adultery and fornication, what is lacking is a stable and intended atmosphere, with two parents, a father and a mother, in which a child ought to be born, wherein his reception into the world is properly provided for, where parentage is clearly identified. Adultery usually involves injustice to other spouses and children. We have today, in addition, many children who have only one parent in their lives. It is abundantly clear that well-intentioned welfare policies have often fostered this abnormal situation. This single-parent-hood usually entails an elaborate state-run system to supply what is lacking both in terms of finances, emotional support, and authority, things, in fact, that the state cannot truly supply.

“The object of begetting a child is the child itself, not some scientific or human purpose aside from the child's good.”

Irving Kristol, I think, puts his finger on why:

On its family series and soap operas, television portrays the ideal father envisaged by the liberal imagination. He hugs his children, assures them that he loves them, guides them through their homework, is actively involved in all their extra-curricular activities, etc. These fathers, of course, are generally upper-middle-class professionals, with the ability to share “quality time” with their children. Such fathers, when they exist, are to be treasured. But in no sense are they “ideal” fathers, against which all other versions of fatherhood are to be judged. Too many fathers are exhausted and/or distracted by their work, or simply lack the requisite gregarious personality. But they can be, and usually are, “good fathers.”

A good father has two characteristics. First, he is *there*, a loyal member of the household. Second, he works to help support his family. The fact that his wife may also work, part-time or full-time, is irrelevant. While she *may* work, he must work, because fatherhood and work go together. Whether he spends “quality time” with his children, “nurturing them,” loving them, is of far lesser importance. We do not live in a unisex world. Children may adore their fathers, but if it is love they seek, they will usually prefer to go to mother.⁵

As Kristol points out, the state has gone into competition with fathers for the financial support of families, a disastrous turn for both families and the state.⁶

Something of the same problem is the result of divorce and remarriage, which is generally an attempt to replace an unsuccessful marriage with a so-called successful one. This leaves the children or spouse of the previous marriage to deal with the new family. The very principle of divorce undermines the intended long-range stability of a marriage required both for the children and for the friendship of the spouses. In many cases, divorce is a serial form of polygamy or polyandry, in which time replaces place as the locus of temporary unity or utility. Divorce and remarriage, polygamy, and to a less extent polyandry, at least attempt to imitate the family in some form but allow the unjust side effects to be tolerated or ignored. More and more studies are indicating that divorce has dire long-range consequences to the children who see in the causes of divorce a rejection of their own being.

Allan Bloom, in his remarkably blunt discussion of divorce in *The Closing of the American Mind*, put the matter clearly:

Children may be told over and over again that their parents have a right to their own lives, that they will enjoy quality time instead of quantity time, that they are really loved by their parents even after divorce, but children do not believe any of this. They think they have a right to total attention and believe their parents must live for them. There is no explaining otherwise to them, and anything less inevitably produces indignation and an inextirpable sense of injustice. To children, the voluntary separation of parents seems worse than their death precisely because it is voluntary.... The important lesson that the family taught was the existence of the only unbreakable bond, for better or for worse, between human beings.⁷

Again, I cite these lines because they reveal that an institution to which we have become so accustomed, an institution that at bottom teaches something at variance with what ought to be, when looked at honestly and objectively, is something that really ought not to exist. When it does, it will cause untold damage in one form or another. Allan Bloom, in other words, merely repeats what we read in another form in the New Testament about adultery and divorce.

The interesting thing about all of these systems, if they can be called that, is that they are all somehow related to a very ancient discussion, that of Socrates in the famous Fifth Book of Plato's *Republic*, wherein it was proposed that ideally there should be no family at all but rather a communality of wives, children, and property. This communality was proposed as the best arrangement for begetting and caring for children, the best way to foster philosophy and order. This discussion in Plato must also be seen in the light of Aristotle's response to it in the Second Book of *The Politics* and to some extent of Aristophanes' play *The Parliament of Women*, to which *The Republic* itself is a response. This classical discussion is useful for us to look at because it does not have any overtones of the revelational tradition. It is proposed as a philosophical project for the proper way to live. Aristotle's rejection of this way of life, something that St. Thomas followed, is likewise proposed as a philosophical conclusion.

The argument in Plato, however, is for our purposes here the more interesting discussion, though Aristotle is more correct. In a sense, we do not, even in our own time, have any more radical proposal than that of Socrates. The communality of wives and children as posed by Plato remains something that even the most radical modern thinkers do not dare to propose in its entirety. We find one or another aspect of Plato's proposals offered separately so that we do not always see the relation to the whole alternative. This is why Plato remains important to us, because he describes the outside limit of what is possible to propose. Even the proposals that come to the fore under the heading of genetic engineering are, in principle, I think, already contained in one form or another in Plato.



What needs to be remembered about Plato's discussion is the current controversy about Plato's actual intent in proposing the communality of wives and children, about whether he was serious in this proposal, as Aristotle thought, or whether he intended rather to suggest that this arrangement was an extreme form of life

to which the principles of justice in logic pushed us. Once any reasonable person saw what this extreme form of a perfectly just life entailed, that is, the destruction of the family, he would reject it as both impractical and even perhaps as immoral. It was intended, in other words, to warn us not to do certain things. It was intended that we keep the traditional structure of the family, as Aristotle had defended it.



This same warning is thus found in the more practical Aristotle, whose arguments against the communality of wives, children, and property have become the standard common sense responses to the extreme ideological manipulation to which the institution of the family and the begetting of children can lead us. Aristotle, in effect, as St. Thomas well understood, gave us a picture of the family which, with some exceptions, is closest to the picture of a stable marriage that I outlined in the beginning, the one recommended in revelation. Aristotle thought that the secure identity of parenthood and the particular care that definite parents gave to their own particular children best provided for the well being of family members and best understood what that family was in all its variety.

This being said, let me recall the proposals of Socrates in *The Republic*. The first thing to be noticed is that it was proposed very cautiously by Socrates. Socrates had earlier remarked that “friends had all things in common.” The young potential philosophers with whom Socrates was talking remembered this curious phrase; they wondered if this commonality included wives and children, a truly shocking position. At the end of Socrates’ discussion of justice in Book Four, Socrates had established the need for what he called military and intellectual guardians, those who were well trained and well disciplined, who would not be swayed by greed or envy so that they could devote all their attention to the good of the republic. This proposal certainly sounds like a noble project.

Socrates held that most rulers and intellectuals were corrupted by two things in particular: envy and greed. He thought that if these could be controlled, a republic could live in peace. The problem was most acute

in the most talented and most attractive of the citizens. In order to control this tendency to greed and envy, Socrates proposed that each guardian should have a very modest house for his own family. But the guardian should only have the bare necessities, nothing that would smack of luxury. He should not have anything in himself or in his wife or children that would cause others to envy them or want to steal from them. This austerity meant something of a Spartan existence, but the end of Book Four implies the existence of marriage, children, and property.

In Book Five, however, the young men insist that Socrates tell them what is really on his mind in this regard, especially as he had really not said much about marriage laws and relationships which, as everyone knows, can cause such turmoil in any community. Much to their astonishment, Socrates, in a very private manner—as he knew how explosive these proposals would be—explains to the young men his project for the communality of wives, children, and property in the republic. What is to be noted is that this proposal was meant only for the city that Socrates was building “in speech”; that is, he was examining what the pursuit of justice meant and where it would ultimately lead. He thus removed marriage and property from his guardians for what appears to be a noble purpose, a purpose that would come up again in another fashion in the New Testament, when Christ told the rich young man to go sell his property, give the proceeds to the poor and to follow Him. We must be curious about the relationship between such proposals. They lead us to look for what is true in Plato even when it appears outlandish.

Plato’s proposals for the family remove from it any relationship between *eros* and begetting. It is to be noticed that modern science also makes this separation between *eros* and begetting as does the theory of contraception. These are the two things that most need to be kept together in the case of the family as it should be. What is to be begotten in Plato, however, is to fall under the control of the state. The state proposes who is to beget and when. The man and woman who beget are

instruments of a scheme to improve the race, a scheme modeled after the scientific breeding of horses and cattle. The best are to be united with the best on some impersonal basis.

There is a genetic engineering aspect to Socrates' proposals, the idea that moral problems come not from will but from genes. It almost seems that it would be better if mankind could avoid the inconvenient necessity for intercourse at all—something that appears in more current scientific proposals for begetting. Who is chosen as a father and who as a mother are under the control of the intellectual guardians, ultimately the philosopher-king. All of this, be it noted, is designed to improve the state and to make its citizens happy and virtuous. Plato does, of course, also have a disciplined program of moral training for the young, even when genetically perfect.

Children are not to recognize their parents, nor parents their children. Every one of a certain age is to call older persons father or mother. They are to call everyone their own age brother or sister. The children are not to be raised by their natural parents, but in state centers which look like a combination of orphanages and 24-hour day care centers. The state is to control the content and context of rearing from the very beginning. In *The Republic*, Socrates recognizes the destructive nature of *eros*, which seems to want to concentrate on the particular person. Plato also holds that when fathers and mothers desire to know the particular child born of them, it implies a disorder in the polity.

This classical alternative to the family, then, has separated begetting and *eros*, parents and children. If children are begotten outside the rules of the state, they are to be aborted or declared illegitimate. When Aristotle said that it was better to be Plato's cousin than his brother, he meant that Plato's brotherhood is so diffused in affection and care that no one is really concerned with anyone else. The enormous care that each parent gives to each child, of course, is dissipated in favor of professional child rearers. In a system wherein everyone is supposed to take care of everyone, however, no one takes proper care of anybody, including the children.

But this lack of individual care was what was intended in Plato. That is, parents were not supposed to take care of their own children; the state was. Family and parental love were looked upon as causes of inequality and difference when what was wanted was sameness

and uniformity. In Plato, we thus have proposed a system of substitute state-controlled nurseries and schools that take total responsibility for the begetting, education, and care of children. Children are not supposed to know their paternal or maternal origins, which are looked upon as destructive of the sort of unity that the state ought to have.

We find various versions of this in recent times. We have a weakening and destruction of the family, with the subsequent growth of state-supported child rearing agencies. Joseph Sobran once put the same problem in its exact and most contemporary terms. Speaking of abortion, welfare, and a concept of general compassion that replaced particular love, Sobran wrote:

What is strange—at least at first sight—is that this callousness about the unborn should occur in a society where we are forever hectored to show “compassion” for others. Even as enlightened voices sternly urge us to take responsibility for unseen strangers, they soothingly release us from responsibility to our own children. If these two positions seem inconsistent, they can be politically harmonized: we can discharge the duties of “compassion” through politics, while the state relieves us of our nearer duties. Since this form of “compassion” is brokered by the tax-collecting and wealth-distributing state, the reasonable inference is that what we are headed for is the totally politicized society, in which relations among citizens replace relations of kinship.

To put it simply, we are required to love, and provide for, our neighbor, and our neighbor's neighbor, and our neighbor's neighbor's neighbor, but not our sons and daughters. This has quite literally given a new meaning to the word “compassion,” which now implies a strangely politicized form of love; a highly unnatural love, at the expense of more natural kinds. The duties of the taxpayer begin to look more absolute than those of the parent.⁸

This description is a contemporary version of the Platonic proposal. All particular love is replaced by a vast “compassion” that is controlled not in the particular domains of the family but in a vague and weakened concern for everyone else but those of our own who need the intense love and concern that alone can take care of actual human beings in families.

These reflections, in conclusion, serve to establish what I take to be the obvious lesson that the various alternatives to the family really demonstrate, namely, that there is nothing superior to the family. This result is something we should expect if we examine the positive side of the classical and Christian teaching about the sacrament of marriage and the nature of the family. At whatever point that an alternate institution deviates from what the family is, there will occur in the world disorders that adversely affect particular people as well as society in general. One of the major causes for the expansion of the state in our time, something that ought not to occur, is precisely the breakdown of the family and its ability to provide what is needed to the spouses and their own natural children. The state has become itself an alternate to the family. In this sense, we live in very Platonic times.

Practically all of the results of the breakdown of the family can be traced back to a rejection in theory or practice of one or another principal elements in the very definition of the family. If we thus line up everything from fornication, adultery, divorce, polygamy, and polyandry to the modern scientific substitutes for begetting or its elimination in abortion, in the form of frozen embryos, surrogate motherhood, sperm banks, to systems of child care outside the home, we will see that each of these practices are proposed as an alternative to the integrity of the family and its proper tasks.

My conclusion is very simple: that when spelled out, all the alternatives to the family suggest nothing so much as that the family as it has been presented in common sense and revelation is quite the best institution that we could possibly invent for ourselves if we want to love and keep one another in our begetting, rearing, and living together. None of our alternates to the family, none of the alternative institutions or methods that the human mind has proposed for itself, really work.

What does work, what does seem best, comes from revelation addressed to our reason and common sense, something that we find in Aristotle most of all on this topic. Linus' question can suggest something else: namely, that in fact up in heaven, waiting to assist us in our births as human children, is a wisdom that instructs us about what is best for us, for our children, for society. We are better taken care of in what is most important for us by a wisdom that is not something that we have chosen for ourselves through our customs and legislation on divorce, abortion, and what constitutes a family's well-being. The lesson of the alternatives to the family is that we can do nothing better to help ourselves than to return to what the family really is at its best. In the Holy Family, the mother had to chose to accept God's will for her in order for God's will to be done. Nothing less happens in its own way in every family if it is to be what it is.



NOTES

1L'Osservatore Romano, January 17, 1996, 5.

2See James V. Schall, "Monastery and Home," *The Distinctiveness of Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 200-17; "The Christian Guardians," *The Politics of Heaven and Hell: Christian Themes from Classical, Medieval, and Modern Political Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1984), 67-82; *Human Dignity and Human Numbers* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971).

3G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World, in Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 57.

4See Sacred Congregation on Doctrine and Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 1988; "Catholic University's Institute of Bioethics on Heterologous Assisted Fertilization Techniques," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 August, 1997, 6; John Paul II, "Scientists: Halt the Production of Human Embryos!" (May 24, 1996), *The Pope Speaks*, 41 (November/December, 1996), 376-80.

5Irving Kristol, *Neo-Conservatism: Selected Essays, 1949-1995* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 68.

6Ibid., 69-70.

7Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 119.

8Joseph Sobran, *Crucial Issue Politics* (New York: The National Committee of Catholic Laymen, 1981), 10.