

*Marriage and Family Life*

I am sure that at one time or another, we have all realized just how difficult it is to reconcile the demands of a heavy schedule with the desire to be with our families. We know just how much we need the support, encouragement and understanding of our families to carry out our duties here.

Also, we have all eventually realized how important it is to enhance the quality of the time spent together with our families, no matter the quantity.

For most Canadian men and women, the family is the place where, in an atmosphere of love and confidence, each member can establish the balance between his or her personal needs on the one hand, and on the other the demands of a social position, the pressures resulting from the duty to get an education and earn a living.

We are asking a lot from the family, and in turn it is asking a lot from us, since we have the responsibility to ensure its success and survival. Anything that can hurt the family unit can have tragic consequences for its members.

While striving to strengthen and support the family unit, we must be careful not to idealize it or consider it as too narrow to embrace the life experience of a great many Canadians. It is true that most Canadian families fit the traditional mold. There is no doubt in my mind that it is through the participation of both the father and mother, to the greatest possible extent, that parents can better bring about the full development of their children. But let us not forget that there are in our country a great many men and women who, as heads of single families, are working very hard to provide their children with a positive family surrounding. These men and women must accept singular challenges and also fight against the remaining stereotypes developed by past generations.

We must also take more into account these other men and women who have the necessary love and understanding to assume the demanding role of step-parents. In short, we are now living in a society where there are many variations of the traditional family, and a narrow vision of the legitimacy and viability of these new families will change nothing to their existence.

In our modern families, there is another dimension which the public has paid too little attention to and which it has not taken enough into account. I refer here to the increasing number of these children who, as adults, are taking care of their parents. This means for a number of them caring for a father or mother in addition to their heavy workloads as housekeepers, breadwinners and parents. For others, it means looking after them in their old age while wanting at the same time to prepare for retirement and feel discharged of the great many demands of life.

I am thinking also of adoption. The time when adopted children were the target of the other children's teases and mockeries are gone, hopefully for good. Canadians have shown that they are really able to provide a family environment for

children who have lost their parents. In the last few years, hundreds of orphans and refugee children from other countries and children with special needs or requiring special care have been adopted in Canadian homes. The adoptive parents have thus provided these children with an opportunity to grow and develop which they would have been denied otherwise.

Of course, the family does not live in a constant state of harmony. External and internal pressures can undermine the capacity for adjustment of the best parents and their children.

However, since the public is now aware of problems such as various forms of violence against children, women and the elderly, widespread efforts are being made to prevent such violence, put an end to it and understand its origins and consequences. I believe that, in these difficult times, a lot can be done if we provide the family and its members with the means to use their existing strengths as an entity and as individuals.

We are now witnessing a phenomenal increase in the number of organizations and non-government groups which devote their energies to strengthening all aspects of the family institution. Many of these organizations are rooted in the community and provide a wide range of official and informal services which are perfectly adapted to the needs of the environment. One of the secrets of their success is their ability to work with the families without interfering with its essentially personal relationships.

We accept as normal the requirement to study and train in our professional occupations. Outside the home, our lives are deeply influenced by the knowledge gained by ourselves and others. On the other hand, we can assume without much training or preparation two of the most basic roles in life, those of a spouse and of a parent. For a number of years, the Canadian Government has been financially supporting programs to prepare people for married life and parenthood, that are implemented in the community by qualified non-government groups.

Preparation for married life is in essence an experience designed to help participating couples learn how to live together in marriage. It is aimed at preventing marriage breakdowns. Participating couples learn better to communicate. Each partner learns how to understand his own family background, in order to appreciate the other partner's attitude towards the fact of being married and how he or she defines the role of a partner in marriage. Those courses also deal with other topics that are basic to a stable relationship, such as financial management and the need to have a positive sex relationship. A good marriage preparation course can help couples prevent conflicts or, where applicable, find a satisfactory solution.

Often the courses on parental guidance are provided within a prenatal program including health and social needs. Those courses deal especially with the years during which the child-