At the core of human concerns is that directed to loved ones in the family. Because this instinct was given to the human person by God, this concern for the family is shared by the Church. Time and again the Popes, expressing this concern for all the bishops and the whole Church, have stepped to the fore in defense of the human person and the human family. In our own time, Pope John Paul II has in a most notable manner, performed both defenses, both of the human person, as evidenced by his prophetic stance against totalitarianism, and in the solicitude he has demonstrated for the family from the first days of his pontificate. John Paul II's extensive writings on the family will be studied for decades to come.

This magisterial regard for the family is prompted by the new challenges posed to family life by the many and rapid changes of the 20th century. Vatican Council II contains many references of concern for the family, which include and extend far beyond the pastoral. In its document Gaudium et Spes ("The Church in the Modern World") we find the following: "The family is the place where different generations come together and help one another to grow wiser and harmonize the rights of individuals with other demands of social life; as such it constitutes the basis of society. Everyone, therefore, who exercises an influence in the community and in social groups should devote himself effectively to the welfare of marriage and the family. Civil authority should consider it a sacred duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family, to protect and foster them, to safeguard public morality and promote domestic prosperity. The rights of parents to procreate and educate children in the family must be safeguarded." (Sec. 52)

Now in recent decades, the claim of concern for "the family" has never been far from domestic public policy debate in the United States. In fact, all political parties and factions thereof traditionally claim to be committed to promoting the well-being of families. The excerpt of Gaudium et Spes quoted above is a good enumeration of the family's place in society ("constitutes the basis"!), and its roles, including education of children.

Claiming for oneself concern for the family does not necessarily mean commitment in practice. Public policy has necessary limitations in what it can
do as regards the family. On one hand, there is the well-based respect for these subsidiarity-defined boundaries of government; the family is rightly regarded as a privileged set of relationships, not created or regulated by the Congress (as would be the case for Amtrak). On the other hand, this legitimate recognition of state limitation provides an excuse for a neglect of issues relevant to the family. Therefore, cultural, economic, legal and policy trends are not examined in any meaningful way for their impact on the family.

There has been a genuine neglect of the family, indeed one could chronicle many areas. Two areas suggest themselves for special attention. One, in the words of the Council, "the true nature of marriage and the family" could inform general policy orientation to the family, and the second, to "promote domestic prosperity" is a case study of delayed attentiveness to the family of practical application in the area of tax policy.

The suggestions that flow from these considerations of American public policy is that, first, these examples are genuinely illustrative of policy trends of the last 50 years, and second, the Catholic citizen can make an immense contribution to social well-being by helping to restore the place of prominence to marriage as the basis of the family, which is the basis of social life.

Rediscovering Marriage: Basis for a General Orientation of Public Policy on the Family

As the Council wrote: "Civil authority should consider it a sacred duty to acknowledge the true nature of marriage and the family . . . ." As noted previously, and easily remembered by most persons, all American politicians at all times express deep regard and concern for the family. The only problem has been the expression "family" has tended to mean different things for different people. In the realm of politics, the uproar caused at the 1979 White House Conference on the Family over their broad, new definition of "family" spawned the "pro-family movement" of the 1980s, which gave substantial new attention to the place of prominence to marriage as the basis of the family.

Any worthwhile consideration of "the family" must be linked to, as the Council teaches, "marriage". This obvious connection is not the starting premise of public policy analysts. The reason for this lies not so much in a radical denial of the significance of marriage (although this is a sub-trend in some policy proponents) as it is a neglect of marriage and its significance.

Legislative and public policy interest in the 1960s and 1970s initiated vast new domestic aid programs. However, many of these developed more from immediate political pressure rather than reflection on the fundamental social institution of the family and its supporting structures. This period of time was characterized by the primacy of policy concern for children. Children certainly merit the concern of public policy, but the approach taken repeatedly viewed children in isolation from their parents. This is seen very clearly in programs designed for the poor: the focus on programs for children was taken when any hope for their parents was given up. Decades later, locked in the
cycle of poverty, the outcomes for many of these high-risk children was not good. Could excluding their parents have had an effect? Today's programs are set up for the high-risk children of the high-risk children of the 1970s.

In time, there developed a policy direction that was explicitly a "children's policy." The explosive definitional process of the 1979 White House conference further encouraged analysts to avoid family issues, and shift to children. Brooking Institution analyst Gilbert Y. Steiner, in his book of that period, The Futility of Family Policy, argued that family policy was impossible if the nation couldn't even settle on a definition of the family. The fashionable "Children's Defense Fund" has involved itself in many issues that presented real threats to children. Although CDF claims that the entirety of the family is present in their policy formulations, parents are almost systematically excluded from their analysis. In the U.S. House of Representatives, a (now defunct) non-legislative committee was established called "The Committee for Children, Youth and Families." The last word of the committee title, "families" was added reluctantly, but just in case any discussable topic should arise. They hedged their bets on the family definition issue by use of the word "families," in which they signalled that any definition of family would do.

At the present time, there is a greater recognition among policy analysts that the family itself is significant, and that family should encompass a greater interest in parents. However, the roster of policy hands is one that is full of the 1970s approach. The greater issue is that marriage, essential as the bond of husband and wife, and foundation of the family, remains absent from any real recognition, must less consideration. The greatest policy challenge perhaps for the next century will be the effort to restore marriage to policy concern, as well as, and more importantly, centrality and respect in the American culture.

Policy Study: Absence of the Family From Tax Code Attention, 1948-1986

Another charge of "sacred duty" the Council gave civil authority was to "promote domestic prosperity," which states in this setting the Church's concern for the economic well-being of families. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas reasonably find that the life of virtue is burdened greatly by the lack of subsistence in the goods of the world. Therefore, it is incumbent on rulers to seek the prosperity of the community and families within it.

In the modern state, with the graduated income tax, in times of prosperity, families may do well, but inflation and increasing high tax rates can harm families. In a essay from the early 1980s, tax analyst Eugene Steuerle expected to find great loss of revenue to the federal government through the exemption for dependent children. Rather he found the opposite: inattention to the family caused the exemption to shrink in value from 1948 onwards.

According to Mr. Steuerle, "perhaps no change in the nation's tax laws has been more significant, yet less recognized, than the shift since the late 1940s in relative tax burdens on households of different size. Whether measured by
dollars or by average tax rates, the tax burden of households with dependents has grown dramatically relative to households without dependents, both single and married." Although not the result of a discernable policy decision, he found "we have a passive public policy toward the dependents of taxpayers."

This passive policy meant that historically, as personal income in the nation grew, the dependent exemption was not adjusted, or grew very slowly, thus shrinking its significance. The exemption per dependent was $600 from 1948-1969; was $625 in 1970, $675 in 1971, and $750 from 1972-1978, and set at $1,000 in 1979 until major reform in 1986. But to put this in perspective, in 1948 (exemption $600), median family income was $3,187 and by 1969 (exemption still $600), the median family income had more than doubled. The median family income of 1981 (exemption $1,000) was more than $22,000, about seven times that of 1948, yet the exemption did not even double.

If the exemption had been indexed to income growth since 1948, and was to offset the same percentage of income that it did in 1948, the exemption would have been about $4,500 in 1980 and over $6,000 today.

A major crisis developed with the debates that resulted in the Tax Reform Act of 1986. Initially, the best received draft proposal was one that would have increased the personal exemption for adults, but would have left the dependent's exemption at $1,000. This stance was one that regarded children pretty much as a "consumption choice" of parents, not appropriately "subsidized" by tax exemption. So much for social solidarity. Happily, a reaction to this, armed with research on the exemption, carried the day, and an exemption equal to the adult was secured for dependents.

Another issue of significance in taxation was secured two years later, when the exemption was tied to increases in the cost of living. Therefore, the exemption is at least not stalled, and rose from $2,450 for 1994, to $2,500 for 1995 tax returns.

This "case" in tax policy shows that "passivity" to the family has real consequences. In 1948, the family with median income and average number of children was almost completely absolved of federal tax liability. Today, even with a larger dollar figure exemption, there is less assistance to families. Of course, there was never a statutory requirement to maintain the effect the 1948 exemption had. A passive policy approach would simply let the exemption remain where it is, until some political outcry or pressure forces an adjustment.

An underlying difficulty is that the size of such family assisting instruments as the exemption rests on a currently understood social value of family life. Yet there has been little discussion of such fundamental questions in setting the amount. American social policy has historically shied away from the European social insurance mechanisms that placed a modest "family allowance" as the cornerstone of family policy. These measures find support in the encyclical tradition of the Church, and are certainly explicitly ratified.
by Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*, published on the 90th anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*.

Certainly many measures, such as a tax credit for dependent children, or a traditional family allowance, or increasing the dependent and stabilizing the adult exemption, all merit consideration. Increasing discussion of a "flat tax" measure requires serious consideration on the manner in which families with children will be affected by it.

**Conclusion**

American public policy recognizes the status of the family. In an agrarian age, children were an economic asset. In an industrial, and post industrial age, children require serious and continued sacrifice by parents. This, too, is a reason the efforts of parents merit recognition. However, there is no inclusion of the family and its efforts for dependent children in our policy process. There have been opportunities for beneficial intervention for families, for which we are grateful. We need the contribution of the insights of the Church's wisdom on the social dimensions of marriage and childbearing to be brought to these debates. This can be done by those who are informed by these teachings to vigorously question current trends. Such will be on behalf of the non-sectarian truth of marriage and the family.

The purpose of these activities will not simply advance a family agenda, but will foster a rediscovery of the "good news" of marriage and the family, which is also to foster life, "the civilization of love," and hope. As Pope John Paul II said in a 1980 homily in Germany: "Public opinion is not always favorable to marriage and the family. And yet, in our anonymous mass civilization, they prove to be a place of refuge in the search for a haven and happiness. Marriage and the family are more important than ever: cells of reproduction for the renewal of society, springs of strength, because of which life becomes more human."