
This valuable book was sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Family, as part of a project to publish current research on the actual role and functions of the traditional nuclear family in various contemporary societies. The title strongly signals the book’s intent, which is to continue the battle to affirm the particular value of a “conjugal” or “natural” family structure for healthy social life, in a context that increasingly denies the differential impact of particular family systems.

The Council—indeed the whole Catholic social teaching tradition—has staked out a claim absolutely central to its critique of contemporary family change. That is, first, to recognize that it is true that the family as a social institution is significantly changing in structure, dynamics, and legal status around the world, as evidenced for example by increases in divorce, cohabitation, single parenting, legitimation of same-sex unions or marriage, and reduced fertility. Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of liquid society figures prominently here.

But second, when the conjugal family melts away as the dominant type, individuals and societies in fact will lose a great deal of incredibly valuable personal and social capital that other family forms just cannot provide at a needed level with any consistency. The traditional nuclear family, consisting of a heterosexual conjugal couple with children, remains a gold standard: It will result in visibly, scientifically measurable, better lives and a better social order than other types of family systems. For Catholics this is because it best expresses the design of God’s natural law. The further away a family type gets from this bull’s-eye, the less positive impact on personal and social goods we should empirically see.

This is our Catholic claim. But is the Catholic vision of the family just a relic of the past, mere “ideology,” or an essential and empirically demonstrable component of social well-being that must be favored and supported into the future because of what it provides? The social-scientific question is therefore as follows: If we do the best unbiased research we can on this matter, using the best possible data sources and research methods, what do we find? Is the Catholic family hypothesis supported?

In this set of studies, across the diversity of research settings, the answer is a solid yes—and the various authors went out of their way to ensure that the conceptual framework, research methods, and analyses would not bias the results.
For the first stage of the Council’s effort, research projects on contemporary family conditions were organized in Italy, Brazil, Poland, Mexico, Spain, and the U.S. Promising results were presented at the 2012 World Meeting of Families held in Milan that year. There, Donati, the Italian project director, proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework concerning the conjugal family as a “social good” that generates both individual well-being and societal solidarity, because of how it fosters healthy individual development, reciprocity, and mutual caring across generations, among other things. He also laid out some typical measures to use to answer specific questions. In general, four types of family systems are compared in each society; singles, one parent, couples married or unmarried with children, and couples married or unmarried without children.

The present volume, pegged to the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, contains Donati’s summary of this framework, which all studies then apply in a slightly adapted way to fit with available large data sets in each country. Then comes Sullins’s research on the U.S., followed by studies completed in Chile and Argentina. Sullins concludes with a thoughtful summary of findings and implications for Catholic social thought. The presentation of data about these three particular societies is helpful, because they differ in the degree of de-institutionalization of family life; thus we can observe the global complexities facing the universal Church when it attempts to understand and speak about family life and policy. Despite this diversity of research settings, in measure after measure and table after table (there are many!), we see strong confirmation of the Catholic hypothesis. Whether speaking in terms of economic and educational achievement, social participation and civic engagement, or transmission of social advantage across generations, the gold standard of the conjugal family is sociologically visible.

A particular pleasure reading this book is engaging with a Catholic-friendly, indeed Catholic-inspired sociological vocabulary. It is grounded in classical functionalism with its concerns for sustaining a healthy social order, to be sure. But it also echoes contemporary relational and realist theories concerning life in inherently rapidly changing (or “morphogenic”) societies, being deployed in American studies of altruism and well-being, as well as in work on solidarity and subsidiarity done by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences to which Donati belongs. In recent years Sullins, an award-winning member of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, has been making excellent contributions to the methodologically sophisticated empirical demolition of the ideological claim, often driven by same-sex marriage advocates, feminists, and liberal social scientists, that all family types, including same-sex parent systems, have pretty much the
same “the kids are OK” outcomes. His analysis here continues in that vein, though without so much emphasis on the particular question of homosexual marriage and parenting. Data are still meager in other societies about same-sex couples, so don’t look for much discussion of that in this volume.

Another happy quality is the frequent consideration of whether results showing the relative superiority of outcomes for family members in conjugal families are the result of selection effects or actually caused by the structure itself—the latter being what a Catholic interpretation would suggest. The reader will find good discussions about this, as well as fine reviews of current trends in family research and theory overall. I noted that American scholars are very highly represented in the sources used by all authors.

The book is somewhat rapidly assembled, so it suffers from occasional formatting and printing errors, but the translations into English from Italian and Spanish are quite satisfactory. The book is available from the Vatican publisher, though as of this writing not yet from Amazon. It is worth the slight inconvenience to get a copy.

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The dreams of the late 1960s—of liberation, empowerment, and hope—still leave a commanding legacy, one whose expenditure has been extended into an Indian summer by Pope Francis. Those young at the time find it difficult to believe that times change for them too and that the magical congruence of Vatican II and liberation has slipped so far into memory as to be now the material for historical reflection. In his aptly entitled work, Horn supplies an indispensable account of what he terms “the honeymoon phase of second wave progressive Catholicism,” 1965–1968 (1). It signified a unique pairing of praxis and theological dreams in a melding that led to what is termed the “Spirit of Vatican II.” A vision of its possibilities unfolded in an era of remarkable protest and unrest which marked the late 1960s. That golden month of May 1968 changed culture and politics in ways that still resonate.

Horn undertook this study to rectify “the silences of historiography” (259–60), which left out the contributions Catholics made to these shifts in radical expectation in the late sixties. In filling this gap, Horn is peculiarly