

# The Catholic Family as a Minority Group

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The sociological writing most relevant to the theme of a conference on 'The Catholic Family and its Needs', is that concerned with the position of minority groups and with social change. The minority group with which we are concerned is a social or cultural minority, that is to say, it is a minority distinguished from the majority by the fact that it holds, as a group, distinctive values, attitudes and ideals!

The social scientists who first studied minority groups of that kind concluded rather hastily that there were only two possibilities open to such a minority in the contemporary world—either existence as a segregated closed group, or complete absorption and assimilation to the majority. It has, however, been shown by subsequent research that this was a false dichotomy. As a matter of fact, valid dichotomies are rare in the social sphere, and one should adopt a sceptical attitude to those which are proposed. These dichotomies generally derive from over-emphasis on the determining impact of social forces and they are not usually in accord with a Catholic approach to empirical study of social life, which, when known, can be accepted or rejected, changed or controlled, through the use of the human understanding, and the power of the grace of God. The Catholic in a position of social responsibility should avoid adding to the classical danger of being impaled on the horns of a dilemma the new peril of being split by a false dichotomy. And so it is with regard to minorities—in addition to 'segregation' and 'assimilation' there is the further possibility of 'limited integration'.

Limited integration is the position where the minority adopts many of the established patterns of the majority but retains its own distinctive system of values, and the distinctive attitudes and practices based on these values. All this may seem somewhat remote, but it is relevant because there cannot be much doubt that in Britain today Catholics constitute a social minority, and, in particular, with regard to family life. In accordance with the theology of redemption where the natural is a basis for the supernatural it would therefore appear to be worth

paying some attention to the conclusions of social scientists regarding groups in a position such as that in which Catholics find themselves in Great Britain.

A good deal has been written by sociologists regarding the position of such groups and their relations with the majority. It would be disturbing if the sociological conclusion were that the trend towards assimilation is practically irresistible. It is not that, however. On the other hand it should not be concluded that no difficulties face a minority such as Catholics are. The kind of conclusion which may be found in sociological text books is: 'in accordance with the tendency towards conformity, and owing to the strain of maintaining different patterns, the members of a minority group tend to move towards assimilation with the majority'. In less pedantic language the idea is a very commonplace one that human beings tend to fall in with the crowd. In effect, there is a pressure towards the gradual abandoning of distinctive minority practices and, finally, the rejection of the ultimate values of the minority. The sociological evidence does not lead to the conclusion that assimilation is inevitable. It does indicate clearly that it is likely to occur, unless the minority takes definite steps to prevent it. In analyses of the relation of minorities to majorities attempts are made to identify these necessary steps. The general consensus can be summed up in three propositions: (1) the members of the minority group should be aware of their position and should be educated in terms of it; (2) the minority, as a group, should take steps to support its members in the face of the strain of difference; (3) specific services should be developed by the minority to perform the functions of any majority service which it rejects, and of any which do not meet the different needs of the minority.

The first proposition is that the members of a minority group should be aware of their position and should be educated in terms of it. Its impact becomes clear when it is related to the second sociological concept to which I referred, the concept of 'social change'. It is axiomatic that societies and their established patterns of behaviour change. What is at times overlooked is that not all changes are a result of the same kind of process. Sociologists distinguish structural change and ideological change, or, more simply, adaptations in behaviour and changes in ultimate values. Some alterations in concrete practices are simply adaptations to changes in other parts of the social system. For example, modern transport has brought some variations in the patterns of leisure-time activities. Other alterations on the other hand are the

result of change with regard to basic values. The latter type of change would occur for example if all the members of a group who formerly practised euthanasia became Catholics.—there would be a change of ultimate values which would produce a change in specific practices. There is a story of a campaigner for the rights of women who returned after the war to an area in North Africa, in which in pre-war days she had tried to raise the status of women. When she returned she was delighted to see that, whereas before the war a man's wives walked a respectful distance behind him, now the men had given their wives precedence, and she hurried to congratulate one of her former adversaries on this progress. 'Yes', he said, 'My wives go before me now. You see, there are still a lot of unexploded bombs around'. The change was only structural. On the other hand, if the men of that polygamous society had all become Catholics, and changed over to monogamy, it would have been an ideological change.

Nearer home, I should describe as structural the change which has been analysed in social surveys like *Family and Kinship in East London*: the change from the extended family and the close kinship group of Bethnal Green to the isolated young couples in Greenlea Housing Estate. The changes in practices which result are structural. On the other hand, the changed general attitude to the dissolubility of marriage is a change of ultimate values. The point is that some differences between the patterns of attitudes and behaviour of a minority and a majority will have resulted from differences in their respective accepted values. Other differences between a minority and a majority will be the result of less rapid, or diverse, adaptation to changes in other parts of the social structure. A minority moving towards integration, but wishing to avoid complete assimilation, may accept the majority patterns which are the result of different adaptations, but not those which are the result of a difference in values.

It is important, therefore, that the minority and its members should be aware of the source of each of their specific differences from the majority. Lack of awareness of the source of difference may, on the one hand, lead to an attempt to prevent the acceptance by the minority of even those majority patterns which need not be rejected. This will produce unnecessary strain and tension. On the other hand, it is easy to get uncritical acceptance of attitudes and patterns of behaviour which are based on different and incompatible values. Research in some United States universities, for example, has revealed courtship practices which are incompatible with the Catholic value of chastity, but some

of the Catholic students in these surveys did not appear to be aware of this incompatibility. Acceptance of patterns based on incompatible values leads ultimately to the rejection of the distinctive minority values. If a minority has not a clear analysis of the situation it is open to additional strain—either through the acceptance of practices based on incompatible values, or through the rejection of practices which need not have been rejected. A shorthand formula for my initial formulation of the first proposition might therefore be, the need for clarification of the position, or somewhat more technically, the need for social analysis. It involves both advertence to the nature of social change and distinction of the sources of differences.

Clarification of the position and social analysis are also necessary in a second context. A characteristic of groups which are relatively closed groups, either a segregated, or almost segregated, minority, or a completely dominant majority, is that because of the uniformity which exists, the members take ultimate values for granted, and emphasize established rules of behaviour. The accepted attitudes and practices of the group tend not to be looked upon explicitly as linked with ultimate values, and they appear more as group regulations than as practical essential implications of the values held by the individual members of the group. When a minority is moving towards integration and when the members of a minority group are meeting other practices and values it is likely that the members will continue to maintain group patterns only to the extent that they understand how these practices are related to the ultimate values which they themselves hold. An application might be that we should not isolate discussions on the Catholic family from the Catholic philosophy of life. Ultimately a Catholic's position regarding the family is based on his concept of the origin, nature and destiny of a human being in the divine plan. From this derives the Catholic point of view on the central themes of discussion with regard to the family, and it is important that discussions of these themes should not be isolated from the general context of Catholic life, belief and values. Similarly, specific problems, such as the position of Catholics in relation to family planning, should not be allowed to become isolated issues.

A third comment in this sphere is that clarification is again necessary with regard to the exact position of the Catholic family. This would require systematic social research.

The second proposition is that the minority as a group must take steps to support its members in the face of the strain of difference. The

support in question is not simply a matter of material support. We sometimes talk about the need for material support for members of the Catholic minority who are in positions of particular strain as a result of their adherence to Catholic ideals, and it is important in particular concrete situations, such as, for example, the position of young, or not so young Catholic couples seeking accommodation and finding it difficult. Support implies more than that however; firstly spiritual support, and secondly what might tentatively be called psychological and emotional support. The need exists not merely for Catholic parents but for all the members of the minority group. In particular the proposition refers to those of the minority who are in positions of social responsibility. In relation to family values, amongst other matters a Catholic can find himself very much in a minority. In such a situation intellectual clarity and competence in discussion are essential, but are not sufficient. Put quite simply, it just gets one down to be continually on the defensive, and constantly to be the subject of supercilious sympathy. This is true of the parents of a large family in many areas, and it is also true in this context of many social workers in their professional capacities. In addition, then, to knowledge, and in addition to spiritual support, Catholics should give each other what might be described as psychological and emotional support. This is the sort of support which such bodies as the Guild of Catholic Professional Social Workers or Catholic Family Groups can supply. Such organizations can provide not only spiritual opportunities and lectures, but, very importantly, the chance of serious and sympathetic discussion.

There is, too, the need to face fairly the matter of good social work for, and by, Catholics, and consequently the need for proper training. There may be at times procedures which are based on different values. The related social work techniques may not be objectionable from a Catholic point of view; they may, however, be defective. A case-work approach to a Catholic client which fails to take account of religious factors in the client's life is not merely morally inadequate: it is inadequate as social work itself.

The third proposition is that specific services must be developed to perform functions of any majority service which the minority rejects, and to supply any which do not meet the different needs of the minority. Thus a parish priest who disapproved of a non-denominational youth club because he thought it a threat to the Catholic faith and practice of his children, ought not to confine his attitude to denunciation. He should want to provide an alternative to meet the need which

the majority provides, but which the minority in this particular cannot accept.

This principle should be applied in the sphere of family life. It is frequently mentioned and generally accepted in relation to advisory and supportive services. That is to say, it is accepted in relation to services where the majority services are rejected, and in these spheres alternatives are being provided to some extent. It also applies to services which do not meet the different needs of the Catholic group. The tendency for Catholic families to contain more children than other families is a demographic fact related to the Catholic rejection of birth prevention. Now this may affect the adequacy of some of the social services. I have already mentioned the housing services. There may be need for special facilities in other spheres also. The Children's Department for example of an area which has decided to use only foster homes, and no residential hostels whatsoever, have not planned for families of eight or more. When such families are in difficulties, even for a temporary period, as when the parents have been injured in a car crash, unless some Catholic agency is prepared to step in, the Children's Department has no alternative but to break up the family to place them in foster homes. 'Where would you get a foster home for eleven children?' they ask. That question should not have to be asked. Or, perhaps, it should be asked, but no local authority would need to ask it often because they should know where to turn. It is difficult for fosterage; it is more difficult for orphan families. This is a field where Catholics must analyse the situation, a field where they must develop a new social apostolate, or possibly a new form of apostolate for those who have been for centuries engaged in the social sphere. It would not be such a new social apostolate really. There are members of the Young Christian Workers and the Legion of Mary devoting their lives entirely to the community through the services of their specific groups, and I am sure that members of the Union of Catholic Mothers and the Catholic Women's League would do the same if only the position were clarified, discussed and action taken.

The general conclusion is, then, that even as a minority, Catholics can preserve their family ideals, provided they make their adjustments and plans in terms of their own value system, and not that of the majority group. If we are clear about the position and the need, and determined to act with the guidance of our values and the inspiration of our faith, Catholics can develop not merely social policy for themselves, but can develop for all a pattern which will be good in itself, and

good social work, as well. It may require changes in our approach and in our traditional organization. But we can remember what Pope Saint Pius X said about traditional ways: 'I have a great respect for traditions', he said, 'so great a respect that I have no hesitation about starting a new one'. The process may be a slow one, and it will certainly have to be developed gradually, but it is imperative that, with faith in God, we should make a start. As Father Godin, the apostle of proletarian Paris, liked to say, it is not possible to have pat solutions and precise blueprints in the complex sphere of social life. And it does not seem to be our Lord's way either—He tells us to ask for our daily bread, not for six months' rations. If we have light enough to set out on the right road, need we ask to have the whole road floodlit?

## Afghanistan

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A first visit to the quarter of a million odd, landlocked square miles of Afghanistan should act on any but a finished, finite clod rather in the same way as Samuel Johnson's tour of the Hebrides did on him. The analogy is not entirely inapposite for, like the Hebrides, Afghanistan is a land of rock; and where one is lashed by the cleansing sea, the other is bathed in the cleansing light of brilliant sunshine out of clear skies, so that both (and one has St Patrick's Breastplate in mind) may be considered similarly to uplift the susceptible spirit.

Afghanistan's rocks, however, are threaded through the valleys down which, in sharp contrast to mauve and grey stone and biscuit-coloured sand, stretch strips of green (from the air, black) cultivation, the fields of corn and millet turning yellow, lush vineyards, apple trees and screens of poplar and willow, the more lacy and delicate for the harsh contrast of the major portions of a country clustered round the south-western spurs of the majestic Hindu Kush.

What a formidable thing and an evocative word the Hindu Kush is! No wonder the Afghan people, ethnographically varied though they