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**FIDES DOSSIER**

# **THE CRISIS OF THE FAMILY IN EUROPE**

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## **The population of Europe**

**Vatican City (Agenzia Fides)** - In May 2007, the European Network of the Family Policy Institute IPF presented the European Parliament with a report drafted by a multidisciplinary team of experts on facts and figures collected from international bodies between 1980 and 2005. That Report is the latest and most reliable study on the situation of the family in Europe.

With its information on population the Report shows a slow growth, which increases between 2002-2007, compared with the five previous years. At the end of 2006, the population of Europe was about 500 million. Ireland (with a 16.3% increase), Luxembourg (11.6%) and Spain (11%), were the countries with the greatest growth. Whereas the countries with lowest growth were Germany (0.8% growth), Sweden (2.4%) and Finland (2.7%).

Between 1994 and 2006 the population of Europe increased by 19 million. However 80% of the population growth in that period was due to the presence of 15 million immigrants, rather than normal growth which remained at a stable (circa 310,000 individuals a year), much lower than the United States where the population growth is 12 times that of Europe. Only France and Holland show a national population growth higher than the respective immigration rate.

The Report estimates that beginning in 2025 Europe will start to slowly depopulate, whereas the population of the United States will continue to grow and by 2060 at the present rates the populations of the United States and Europe will be the same (circa 454 million).

## **Ageing**

Europe today has more elderly people than children. Whereas in 1980 there were 36 million more children than elderly people, in 2004 old people were more numerous than children under 14, 23 million less children in 25 years, a reduction of 21%; 10% in the past decade. The population under 14 now represents only 16.2 of the whole population (80 million in the EU of 27 member countries).

Whereas there has been an increase of over 18 million elderly people, (29%) in 25 years. Some 81.7 million people over 65 correspond to one 6<sup>th</sup> of the total population. Men and women over 80 have increased by 84% and are, all together, 18.8 million (one out of every 25 people in the EU). Only one Italian out of 7 ( 14.2%) is young. Spain (44% decrease), Portugal (40%) and Italy (37%) were the countries where less children were born in the period 1980 - 2005. Italy (with almost 20%), Germany and Greece were the countries with the largest percentages of elderly people.

One of the most serious contradictions in European policy is that fact that employment does not adapt to the ageing population. In fact the age of retirement continues to be low all over western Europe. Whereas in the United States the number of people nearly sixty who are still part of the labour force is 30% higher than in Italy for example. The same is true for countries such as Japan and South Korea compared with European competitors like France and Germany. To address this question seriously the whole welfare system and labour market would need to be re-organised, with the gradual privatisation of pension schemes in order to guarantee workers more freedom of choice.

What is more, considering the effects of the ageing population, it would be necessary to adopt a new approach to healthcare, putting aside the vision of healthcare as simply a matter of social costs and assistance and seeing it as an investment instead.

Another factor to consider with regard to the problem of the ageing population is disability. The ageing population and the growing longevity of individuals leads, according to statistics, to an increase in the number of elderly people with a disability in need of long-term care. In Europe 50 million people with a disability represent 10% of the population. There is a close connection between disability and old age: a problem to which others are added regarding disability: excessive exclusion of the disabled person from the labour market; more marked inequality for disabled women; less opportunity for socio-work insertion for people with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties. All problems which in the present situation in many European countries are left to the responsibility of the family. Although European politics is aware of this it fails to make the necessary decisions to resolve the problems of European families helping them to be 'open' to life.

## **The birth rate**

In Europe less babies are born: in 2006, only 5.1 million births were registered. The situation remained stable between 1995 and 2006, with a slight increase between 2005 and 2006 of only 1.1%. This is far from what is called the generation replacement, fixed at a percentage of 2.1 children per mother: in 2005 the percentage was 1.38 children/woman in the EU of 27 countries. France (1.94) and Ireland (1.88) were the countries with the highest birth rate. The birth rates in Greece (1.28), Spain (1.34), Italy (1.34) were what are seen as critical.

During an audience granted to participants at a Conference on values and prospects in Europe promoted by the Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe (COMECE), on 24 March 2007, Pope Benedict XVI said: "from a demographic point of view, one must note that Europe seems to be following a path that could lead to its departure from history. This not only places economic growth at risk; it could also create enormous difficulties for social cohesion and, above all, favour a dangerous form of individualism inattentive to future consequences. One could almost think that the European continent is in fact losing faith in its own future".

Francois Dumont, docent at La Sorbonne, spoke of a "demographic Winter" with regard to Europe, forecasting a situation which will make generation replacement impossible. In the countries most at risk, Italy and Spain, 100 of women today will be replaced by only 70 women tomorrow, with a 30% drop in the birth rate. An ageing and decreasing population has also economic effects, since the wealth of a country depends on also on the number of its inhabitants. Belgium, for example, which presents a marked decrease in its active population, is a country which creates a sixth of the wealth produced by Italy, because its population is six times smaller. In addition to economic consequences, there are social effects, among young people and the over 65s, which will increase steadily and determine social policies.

Europe tends to deal with the problem of its ageing population, evading the cultural factor which constitutes the heart of the matter, which feeds fear of having children and disaffection for the family. Again Dumont says, the main cause of demographic decline has been the profound transformation of the family from the 1960s onwards: "a transformation – he says - which has affected the mother and the duration of the union, the size and composition of the nuclei, the role of parents and the bond between generations. The traditional structure of a father who works and provides for economic needs and a mother who brings up a large family, has almost completely disappeared in Europe, giving way to what are called modern forms, which originated in northern Europe, based on 'respect' for the individual decisions of others, equal roles for men and women as the foundation for the formation of a couple and the parent/child relationship; this transformation is supported and accompanied by a feminist revolution. The result is that we have families which are perhaps more 'vivacious', but also much more fragile and unstable, unable to stand without specific

support policies; [...] when this support is insufficient, there is an ulterior drop in the birth rate. [...] Today we have a situation in which weddings diminish and are more fragile, de facto couples increase but are even less stable and the decision to have children is put off until the age of 30 years and over. All this certainly does not favour the birth rate!"

In the opinion of the same French historian what is happening in Europe today is no different from what happened in other epochs to other civilisations now extinct. Extinction always followed the same pattern: a drop in the birth rate, ageing, decline and lastly decadence. What is new about what is happening now is the intensity and duration of the drop in the birth rate which first concerned northern Europe, then spread to the Mediterranean, changing the whole structure of consumption, affecting also the economic system and discouraging research and investments in new products. This is why it is necessary to rediscover a demographic dynamism which will lower the average age of the population. And there is also need for measures to support families and young people. Many European countries, the French historian says, tend to confuse social policies with family policies. The former are policies of temporary solidarity to help people in need. Whereas family policies are a series of solidarity policies between generations, a long term affirmation in a society ruled by immediate consumption. "To consider the family simply an object of social policies –Dumont says - means making it the object of pity and giving a very sad picture of the family. Instead family policy should render the family free to shoulder its responsibilities. And every public body or authority from advertising to the world of work which affects the life of the family should tend towards this goal."

## **Abortion**

Every 25 seconds there is an abortion in the Europe of 27 countries where every day three more schools are closed for scarcity of children. In 2004, in Europe 1,235,517, abortions were performed, an average of 3,385 a day; 19.4 % of pregnancies, one out of every five unborn babies.

Spain is the country where the number of abortions has risen most in the past ten years, with an 75% increase, followed by Belgium, with 50% and Holland with 45%.

Abortion is the first cause of death in Europe taking more lives than heart-attacks, car accidents, drugs, alcohol or suicide. The number of abortions is higher than death due to illness. Since Portugal decided in April 2007, to allow abortion up to the 7<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy, there remain only three European countries where abortion is still illegal: Ireland, Malta and Poland.

European institutions promote and encourage abortion which is considered a "European right". A resolution approved by the European Parliament in 2002 on "sexual and reproductive rights" ruled that "interruption of pregnancy must be legal, safe and accessible to all women"; urged governments "not to prosecute in any way a woman who has an illegal abortion", encouraged the distribution of contraceptives and sexual health services "free or at a very low cost for lower income sectors", supported access to emergency contraceptives such as the day-after-pill "at accessible prices", and guaranteed sexual education and contraceptives to minors even without parental consent.

## **Maternity age**

The average age of maternity in Europe has been postponed until the age of 30. Spanish women are the latest to have children (30.84 followed by women in Ireland (30.6), Holland (30.4) and Denmark (30.1). The RU486 pill, which has become the most formidable system of birth control is sold in every country in western Europe, except Greece, Norway and Italy - where it is soon to be put on the market.

## **Social costs**

Of the 27% GNP which Europe assigns on average to social expenses, only 2.1% goes to support family policies, not considered a priority. Europe spends less than one euro on the family compared with the 13 euro it spends on social expenses. While Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden and Ireland, spend an average of 1,400 euro per person per year on family policies (triple the European average), Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta and Spain spend 82 euro. Nearly half the countries failed to increase family allowances for the first or second child in 2006 to keep up with inflation and this fact causes discrimination among the countries.

Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece are the countries which offer less assistance to families, and this means they increase the risk of poverty of minors, “because the impact of assistance to families– the IPF report affirms – serves not only to allow them to exercise their right to have as many children as they want, it also has a decisive effect on the situation of minors”. There is a close connection between insufficient social expenses to help the family and demographic ratings. Reports agree that European countries like Italy and Spain which spend less on family policies, are also those with the lowest birth rate.

Following the mobilisation of a Forum of Family Association which led, in May 2007, to the organisation in Italy of 'Family Day' – millions of participants in Rome with the slogan “More Family: what is good for the Family is good for the country” – in February 2008 the fifty Forum member organisations, promoted another event on the question of just taxes for families and regional family policies.

The organisers of the event stressed the need for a tax system based not only on vertical equity (the more you have the more you pay), but also on horizontal equity according to which, on income parity, families with children to support should pay less taxes than those without children. Taxable income must be calculated not only on the basis of income received but also on the number of family members. The participants called for a system of tax relief equal to the real cost of support for every dependent person, on the basis of a scale of equivalence, irrespective of income.

This system would maintain a progressive rate of taxation, and could replace and be an improvement on the present complicate system of tax relief. The problem of those whose income is too low to benefit from deductions could be easily solved by introducing a negative tax, an integration to the income equal to the deduction denied. "In this way – the organisers said - as part of a future, general reform of the tax system, it would be possible to foresee the introduction of measures, such as the family quotient, no longer based on the individual, as a taxable subject, but on the family nucleus instead ”.

## **The family and poverty**

The Italian Istituto di Studi e Analisi Economiche (ISAE) in July 2007, published a report on subjective poverty in Europe. With subjective poverty it detected the perception of individuals with regard to the adequacy of their family income to lead a dignified life “without luxuries, but never going without necessities”: therefore the assessment was affected by a variety of factors, not all directly quantifiable, of a cultural, social, psychological nature, such as life-style and consumer habits, perception of the cost of life, expectations.

Investigations by Eurostat European Community Household Panel (ECHP) - until 2001 - and European Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) - from 2004 onwards - allow us to analyse poverty in the EU through subjective perception of poverty. The Eurostat EU-SILC survey based on 113,000 family units in 13 countries of the Union, and that of ECHP, provide information which allow a comparison of subjective perception of poverty in advanced societies. In the ISAE analysis the information refers to the time of the Investigation in 2004, whereas the incomes refer to 2003. The question posed to the reference person to measure subjective poverty was: "In your opinion, what is the minimum monthly income a family should earn in order to reach the end of the month?". Family nuclei which give an income higher than the income they receive, signal subjective perception of inadequacy with regard to the desired standard of living.

Subjective poverty usually has greater impact in Mediterranean countries and less in Nordic countries. The percentage of families which perceive a state of poverty is very high in Greece (76%), Italy (63%) and Spain (60%), whereas in Portugal the incidence is less than (47.5%), which is still high compared with that registered in Sweden, Denmark and Finland, where the percentage of subjectively poor families is between 11% and 16%, or in Norway or Luxembourg, where it is even lower. The incidence of subjective poverty is consistent with income distribution: the highest quota of needy families is concentrated in the lowest quintiles. This trend is seen in all the countries considered, although there were notable differences in the incidence of poverty per quintile. Looking at the lowest income sector (first quintile), it ranged from a minimum of 27% in Denmark and a maximum of 99% in Italy. In certain countries mainly in the Mediterranean area, the incidence of subjective poverty was high even in the last quintile (around 20%).

Certain characteristics of the family (family dimension and typology, intensity of labour, house ownership) have considerable influence on the perception of poverty. It was seen for example that the greater incidence of subjectively poor families was registered among those with only one member in all countries, except in Belgium, where it was registered among the most numerous families (5 or more members). Then come, almost everywhere, families composed of couples and in some cases (Finland and Sweden), of four members (but in Italy in larger families).

In most countries the probability of declaring a negative gap between effective and necessary income appears higher among one parent families with one or more children (from 85.5% in Italy to 38.6% in Denmark); in Austria and Finland one member families have the greatest incidence (respectively 31% and 22%). "Vulnerable" typologies include large families, (a couple with 3 or more dependent children), especially in Belgium, where this is the typology with the highest incidence, and in southern Mediterranean countries with an incidence of about 70%.

The Eurostat survey also allows us to compare poverty profiles according to the degree of family working intensity, a variable which represents an important determinant of poverty. The information shows that in all European countries, except Denmark, the quota of families which declare themselves poor is higher among those with dependent children and a work intensity equal to zero. This situation reveals a condition of particular poverty due to the presence of a family burden and the scarcity of members with a working activity. Subjective poverty is more widespread when the working intensity is zero even in families with dependent children in Sweden, France, Spain, Austria and Finland, or when it is low but not zero (between 0 and 0.5) in Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Portugal. In the countries in the southern area, this incidence is high even in families with a high working intensity (equal to 1), especially among those with dependent children.

Another aspect which affects subjective perception of poverty is housing. The highest incidence was registered by those who pay rents, especially rents at market price, particularly in Italy, Spain and Portugal (around 70%) and in Belgium and Austria, and for those who declare property in

Greece (77%), while in France and Ireland the problem affects mainly families which enjoy free housing; in this last case it could be a matter of nuclei in conditions of extreme poverty and which live therefore in government assigned housing.

The EU-SILC survey collected information finalised at examining certain aspects of the multidimensional nature of poverty. In particular, those interviewed were asked to give the grade of difficulty encountered to meet a series of expenses connected with housing (heating, bills, rent and mortgage), with the person (holidays, food), unexpected expenses and financial burdens (for housing and other debts). It also took into consideration the conditions of the housing of residence (luminosity, absence of sanitation in the home, presence of humidity and damage), which the European Council of Laeken (December 2001) acknowledged as an important dimension of poverty and social exclusion.

Lastly, it took into consideration possession of certain lasting goods (telephone, TV, computer, washing machine, automobile). The survey helps us make a distinction between the absence of a good due to a decision consequent to the incapacity to meet the cost. This last case was considered indicative of inadequacy with regard to the national living standard. For each of these items the ISAE survey calculated a poverty indicator, drawn from the relation between the quota of those who declared they found difficulty among poor families and the same quota of all families. These indicators allow us to identify consumption for which poor nuclei experience more inadequacy than others. If the indicator is one, the degree of difficulty of the poor family is the same as the rest of the population; the higher the values, the greater the relative poverty of the former prime. Generally, difficulty to meet essential expenses should be greater for families which consider their resources insufficient. However, since the perception of subjective poverty includes personal expectations with regard to living standard, a declaration of inadequacy may refer to non subsistence consumption.

More in detail it considers essential expenses (rent/mortgage, food, bills, heating), the poverty indicator is especially high for almost all these elements in Nordic countries, with some peaks, with regard to food in Denmark, rent/mortgage and bills respectively in Finland and Sweden.

Similar levels are registered in other countries: in Ireland the subjective poor have difficulty with essential expenses relative to the person (food), in Belgium and Austria there is concern above all for the ordinary running of the home (bills). Whereas in southern European countries, where poverty is more widespread, indicators are not far from unity: obviously the income considered necessary here assumes a different and broader significance, less connected with elements of evident difficulty in facing essential consumption expenses. France is in an intermediate position (however, as in the Mediterranean area, indicators relative to the different items show no great difference).

For expenses classified less essential (holidays, unexpected expenses and other forms of borrowing), it should be said that the indicators nevertheless show high figures, but with maximum levels lower than the other group. Also in this case in southern Europe, the indicators are generally lower, compared with the other countries, and close to unity. In most countries, subjectively poor families have more difficulty in meeting expected expenses; whereas in Sweden, Finland France, they have difficulty in affording holidays. With regard to difficulties relative to the seriousness of borrowing, we observe that the problem relatively most felt by the subjective poor is that of expenses connected with housing in Sweden, Denmark, Greece and Spain, while in the remaining countries what prevails is the financial burden of other forms of borrowing.

Lastly, the survey analysed the appraisal of the individuals with regard to housing conditions and statements on the possession of lasting goods, both factors which contribute to define the multidimensional nature of poverty. The relative grade of difficulty, with regard to housing conditions, was more or less similar in all the countries: in many cases the absence of sanitation was what most affects the subjectively poor; in particular, Finland registers very high indicators with regard to the presence of a bath in the home, followed by Austria, Spain, Italy and Belgium.

The Investigation included questions which allow the evaluation of hardship with regard to a series of lasting goods, the possession of which was quite widespread in the countries considered. Relative poverty indicators revealed some differences. For example there were high indicators with regard to the possession of a washing machine in Norway and Finland, an automobile in Sweden, a telephone in Austria, Ireland and Belgium), a colour television set in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

## **Child poverty**

The European Union has 97.5 million children aged 0 and 17 years, and of these, 19 million are at poverty risk. Europe's child poverty average is about 19%. This emerged from a report by the European Commission for Social Protection. One out of four children in Italy is in danger of living below the poverty line. The situation in Italy is the same as that in five new member states Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Latvia and Poland. In Germany the percentage of child poverty is 12%, in France 13%, in Holland 14%, in Denmark 10%, in Spain and United Kingdom 24%. In 10% of the cases the child is poor because his parents are unemployed; in 13% of the cases because they do not earn enough. "Adults – the Commission says – are often less poor than children, because in most countries the assistance system does not compensate the arrival of a child". In Finland, for example subsidies solve 70% of the cases, in Italy 22%, compared with a European average of 42%. According to the report countries with a high rate of child poverty "should adopt combined strategies to support the income of families and facilitate access to quality work, especially for the second wage earner".

## **Domestic violence**

At the world level domestic violence is the first cause of death for women between the ages of 16 and 44. Husbands, boyfriends or lovers, and sometimes even children, kill more than cancer, road accidents and wars. In Europe, crimes against women in the family affect 5.84 women in one million, according to a recent Spanish survey.

In Portugal, 52.8% of the women said they had suffered violence at the hands of husband, lover or companion. In Germany, almost three hundred cases of women murdered by the companion are registered every year: three victims every four days. In the United Kingdom the rate is one every three days; in Spain one every four days, or almost one hundred cases a year. In France, six women in a month - one every five days - die of violence committed by a man in the home: one third are stabbed, another third are shot and the rest are either strangled (20%) or beaten to death (10%). In France the attackers are mainly men with a degree of power thanks to their profession and include company managers (67%), healthcare professionals (25%) police and army officers (Henrion Report, Ministry of Health, Paris, February 2001).

In the Europe of 15 countries, (before it was extended to 25) every year almost 600 women (a little less than 2 a day) lost their life in the family. A Council of Europe Report states: "the rate of domestic violence would seem to increase in direct proportion to income and level of instruction". And it underlines that in Holland "almost half the men who commit violence against women have

university level education ” (Olga Keltosova, Report to the Council of Europe assembly, September 2002).

Romania is the country where domestic violence is most serious, with 12.62 cases in every 1000 female citizens of this type of murder every year. In Finland 8.65 women in every one million women are murdered in the home every year. Then come Norway (6,58), Luxembourg (5,56), Denmark (5,42) Sweden (4,59).

## **The destruction of the institution of marriage**

In 25 years (1980-2005), the number of weddings in Europe has decreased by 692,000, with a loss of 22.3%, and a marriage rate which dropped from 75% in 1980 to 4.88% 2005, despite a population increase of more than 33 million. One out of every two marriages in Europe breaks up.

The marriage age is increasingly more advanced: men over 30 and women over 28. Every year about 2 million babies are born out of wedlock, 1,893,000 in 2005. In some countries this concerns half the babies born: Sweden (55.4%), Bulgaria (49.04%), Denmark (45.4%), France (45.2%), United Kingdom (42.3%). In certain cases these percentages have grown in recent years. According to the national statistics office in 2007 in France the percentage of children born out of wedlock was 50.5%.

In the EU of 27 nations, a marriage breaks up every 30 seconds and there are more than one million divorces. Broken marriages increased by 369,365 between 1980 and 2005, with a 55% increase. Spain, with an increase of 183%, is the country which registered the greatest increase in broken marriages between 1995 and 2005, followed by Portugal (89%) and Italy (62%). Divorces affect some 21 million children. Spain, in recent years 1990-2001, registered the highest number of divorces: 326%. The percentage was 226% in the years 2001-2006.

The Document “New EU strategies to support the Couple and Marriage”, approved by the assembly of the Catholic Bishops of Europe in November 2007, underlined that family crises lead to poverty for children forced to live in one parent families, for women, 85% of whom are head of a one parent family and for the elderly and the disabled who have less chance of assistance and for whom dependence on state assistance increase. “This is why”, the Document states, “politicians should be seriously concerned about the high rate of divorces in the European Union”.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (10 December 1948), states: “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State” (article 16, 3). Nevertheless it is an objective fact that family policies of EU countries run directly opposite to this indication, which is completely overlooked. Instead of the rights and responsibilities of the family as a whole, these policies speak of the rights and responsibilities of the individual family members and consequently law abandons any notion of “responsibility of the family” and recognition of the family's social role. Secondly the family is equalled to one of various types of inter-social relationships which are considered in reference to taste, options and free private arrangements. The concept of family becomes so to say undetermined. In community decision-making and in national legislation, ample recognition and benefits are given to forms of daily living together which constitute an objective alternative to the family. European institutions and legislation regard the family as a historical legacy, rather than an institution which can belong to the future. Therefore there is a tendency to restrict forms of guarantee and stable social promotion based on heterosexual marriage, in favour of growing and spreading promotion of other forms of cohabitation.

In 2003 the European Parliament asked its member countries to grant equal rights to same sex couples and at the same time the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Nice 2001), prohibited any sort of sexual discrimination. (article 9 "The right to marry and the right to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights.").

From article 12 of the European Charter of Human Rights, which protected marriage and the family, meaning unions of a couple of the opposite sex, we have passed to a norm which by guaranteeing the right to marry and the right to found a family, means simply the union of two individuals with the goal of sharing family and affective life; the article refers to national laws eliminating any reference to the necessity of diversity of sex of the two persons. The rule of the Charter of Nice, foresees besides the right to marry also the right to found a family and this means that the European Union supports other unions besides matrimony. There exists then not only a right to marry but also a right to found a family, without having recourse to marriage bonds.

Many European countries foresee besides traditional marriage, institutionalised forms of recognition of bonds among persons of the same sex, with substantially para-matrimonial effects. Although with a diversity of juridical disciplines, registered unions of a public law nature, were introduced in Denmark in 1989, then in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom. France chose a contractual PACS form of bond, whereas Portugal with a law in 2001 opted for a presumptive system, in which the couple is granted rights with or without the signing of any formal pact. Other countries (Belgium, Holland, Spain), opened the way for same - sex marriage. As a result today in Europe Austria, Greece, Ireland and Italy, are the only countries without legislation on civil unions, including persons of the same sex. In some situations it happens, as for example with French law, the so-called PACS, that pacts relative to civil unions are signed, for reasons of fiscal convenience: in that country, a couple which is not a family, but is only living together does not have to combine its income and therefore pays less tax non. This convenience is greater for higher income persons, for the rich.

### **Single-parent adoption of minors**

It is highly probable that in the coming month of May, the Council of Europe will approve a new draft of the European Convention on the Adoption of Minors. If this happens, single parents will have the right to adopt and every EU member country will have to change its national laws to meet this principle. Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, vice-secretary general of the Council of Europe has said "this is a full right of single parents and member countries will be obliged to change their laws".

The different countries will decide whether to grant this 'full right' to de facto couples and same-sex couples, registered or simply living together. In recent months the European Court for Human Rights ruled that a refusal on the part of the French authorities to allow a declared militant homosexual woman adopt a child was a "form of discrimination on a sexual basis". The French authorities' refusal was motivated by the absence of a father figure in the family in which the child would have lived. The European judges noted that French law allows single-parent adoption, although on precise conditions and the refusal was judged to be discriminating with regard to the sexual orientation.

### **The Christian Family**

More than two million people gathered in Plaza Colón di Madrid on Sunday 30 December 2007 to express support for the "Christian family", during an event organised by the archdiocese of the Spanish capital with the support of Church movements and pro-family and pro-life organisations.

That same Sunday 30 December 2007, Feast of the Holy Family, before leading the recitation of the midday Angelus prayer from his window overlooking St Peter's Square, Benedict XVI, speaking in Spanish, encouraged the participants "to bear witness to the world of the beauty of human love and marriage and the family. The family, founded on the indissoluble union between a man and a woman, is the privileged place where human life is welcomed and protected, from beginning to natural end" the Pope said.

Among the personages at the event in Madrid, most of the Spanish cardinals and bishops, leaders of Lay movements and organisations including the Family Forum. Cardinal Antonio María Ruoco, Archbishop of Madrid, gave a homily in which he said "the family is objectively the most serious and disquieting problem which faces European societies ". The Archbishop of Madrid said "the idea of marriage and the family has been radically relativised ", fomenting "from a tender age behaviour and life styles" the opposite to the value of indissoluble love between a man and a woman ", adding that in Spain "the juridical order has taken a step backwards with regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations ", which recognises and endorses the family as "the natural and fundamental nucleus of society and has the right to be protected by society and by the state ".

"Political initiatives" which aim to prevent divorce, to combine professional and family life, to fight domestic violence, to safeguard a decision to care full-time for one's own children up to the age of three years, to cut tax on baby care products, were contained in "Proposals for a Strategy of the European Union for the Support of Couples and Marriage", which the Commission of European Bishops' Conferences presented to Brussels on 5 November 2007. The intention of the statement, we read in the introduction, "is not to question the present EU agreement on the responsibilities of member countries in matters of family rights and family policies". On the contrary it aims to promote discussion on what community institutions "can do in their specific areas of competence". "EU activity with regard to family rights– the document says - consists mainly in an exchange of good practices and promotion of new approaches. It can shape the activity of member countries and introduce minimum social protection threshold ". The population implosion and the family crisis– says COMECE - present serious high emotional, social and financial costs to European society"; and therefore "it is the general interest of Europe to support and strengthen that stable relationship between a man and a woman of which marriage is the ideal expression". "To assist married couples in their life of relationship" and "support parents in their educational duties " are the main goals indicated which the document pin points as a "common task" for EU countries. Between 1980 and 2005 in Europe, the document says, "the number of divorces rose more than 50%, and in the past 15 years more than 13.5 million divorces have involved over 21 million children". Hence the importance of good "formation for engaged couples and programmes for communication to improve dialogue between married couples and enable them to overcome times of crisis". For COMECE, "the revision of the Lisbon Strategy should offer an opportunity to strengthen the social dimension of the same through the introduction of initiatives to reconcile family life and professional life ". To fight the poverty risk of many couples, especially young couples, " EU regional policies " should not exclude "the use of European funds for initiatives aimed at improving general housing conditions for low income couples", COMECE observes.

Domestic violence is also a cause of the destabilisation of family ties: hence the need to "identify counter measures at the European level ", also to prevent "juvenile delinquency", often the result of "family behaviour models". The text stresses the need to "support local associations and volunteer organisations involved in family assistance", and encourages "inclusion in the European debate on mobility of workers, family problems caused by commuting". "In the process of revision of the Strategy of Lisbon it is necessary to offer public opinion a clear sign that to stay at home and look

after one's children (at least until they are three years old) is a welcome contribution to the wellbeing of all EU citizens”: therefore, COMECE underlines the need to eliminate discrimination “in matters of fiscal treatment of persons who remain at home”. “ Specific arrangements in fiscal policy are an indirect way of supporting them. With regard to fiscal measures, the European Union has competence in the area of indirect taxation. This concerns in particular VAT, especially with regard to essential child care items”.

Children run specific risks that greatly impact their opportunities in adult life. Among these risks are those related to an uncritical use of modern technology, contact with drugs and alcohol, unhealthy food. Hence the need to “ devise legislation banning the most brutal and potentially harmful videogames” and “help parents control children's use of mobile phones and the Internet”. A child's health is also connected with the food he eats: “in the EU one in every four children is overweight” the text states, underlining the “centrality of the parent's role in shaping the eating habits of their children”. An essential role also “in the prevention abuse of alcohol and drugs among adolescents”. COMECE called on the European Commission to provide for “support for people with children affected by mental pathologies (2 million in Europe)” or a disability, and assistance to facilitate the re-unification of migrant families, “which should be seen as a key challenge in view of integration”.

“The Catholic Bishops of Europe – said Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in Rimini on 16 February 2008, in his intervention “The Family and the Common Good” - called not for traditional generic family policies, but for a policy of cultural promotion of the family founded on marriage and policies to support the life of married couples and the raising of children, including prevention of marriage crises and education for young people so the family and marriage will once again be attractive in their eyes. I consider this a significant change in tendency. We do need policies for housing and a fiscal system which does not render a child a luxury, but first of all we need to promote the truth of the family in the eyes of the young generations ”.

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