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Family, Child-Rearing, and the Role of Women (December 3, 1961)

Using forceful language, Franz-Josef Wuermeling, Federal Minister of Family and Youth Affairs, describes what he perceives as the threat to the family posed by the growing number of working mothers and the dwindling number of children. He argues for the traditional ideal of women as housewives and mothers.

Today's Family and its Child-Rearing Powers

In viewing the situation of our families and our youth in today's world, a typical "trend of the time" that we have to recognize as a challenge to our Christian worldview and child-rearing goals becomes apparent: Today's man is no longer willing or able to unhesitatingly recognize and reverently accept all of the universe as a divine creation and order. He has become aware of his powers of reason to an extent never before experienced and places them above all else. He already shoots the arrows of his curiosity not only into the earthly realm to explore "what holds our world together at its core"; in these days he also ventures much farther into the expanses of the universe, into outer space.

[. . .]

Nothing Can Replace the Family

Can we, must we, in this strange and dangerous situation, put our hopes in the family? I say yes! Because as the first and most original institution the family can justify faith in God and knowledge of the true meaning and aim of our lives as a firm, religious element of all our struggles and aspirations. In the community of the family in particular, all those qualities that each individual needs to live together with others, even in larger communities, can be best and most effectively developed: self-responsibility and turning to our fellow man, adaptability and consideration. As a holistic living community, it is the family that can best create a hierarchy of values between the individual and society, and link personal freedom with social initiative, responsibility, and a sense of security.

[. . .]

In modern industrial society, the family – though previously not only a partnership but a production community as well, and economically largely autarkic – has largely developed into a consumer collective. Especially in the children's formative years, the family usually has to rely on a single income – that of the [male] breadwinner – which derives from employment. More than three-quarters of all employed people – most of whom still have no notable property today

– work for outside companies, spatially separated from the family, in a dependent position. They work there for wages that are in principle based on performance, which are equal for everyone if equal work has been performed, regardless of how many family members have to be supported by that wage.

From these wages a father usually has to pay for every loaf of bread and every gram of butter in cash the same number of times as there are members of his family. Thus his income is practically divided by the number of people in his family. This is why, today, families with children are economically the weakest.

Complicating the situation is the increasing length of vocational training, which more and more often also necessitates a separation from the family household, thus continuing to limit the possibilities for adolescent children to contribute financially to supporting the family. Extending compulsory schooling to ninth and perhaps even tenth grade and expanding the continuing education track will serve to increase this economic burden even more.

This and a number of other factors have generally caused the economic burden on families with children to increase considerably, for reasons beyond the control of individual families. Consequently, having children has led to social declassing, a decline to totally different social classes. This development has now led to consequences that are of great significance in our context. It has forced families into taking two emergency exits, which, although tending to alleviate the effects of the economic pressure and declassing, serve to weaken the family's child-rearing powers at a decisive point. The family has responded to the economic constraints, first, with the housewife and mother taking up gainful employment, and second, by limiting the number of its children.

Gainful employment of the mother is not a solution

It is not a "solution" to have our housewives and mothers work outside the home; it is a forced evil. We must always keep in mind how the spiritual, personality-forming, so-called "second birth" of the child, especially in the first years of its life, decidedly takes place under the helping hand of the mother in the parents' home. The profound experience of tenderness, encouragement, and care – as only mothers can give – teaches the toddler how to feel affection and love and to return it. The child needs the loving and loved person of the mother, someone to turn to as it grows into a world in which everything is at first new and unfamiliar. For the sake of the mother, the child learns self-control, to acquire skills, to be good, and to become independent.

The loving devotion of the mother, in its constancy and depth, is and remains just as important for development in older children and adolescents. A mother's love and care supports the young person through the hurdles of education and the crises of puberty, sets a good example and conveys role models and value standards. Her love accompanies her child with understanding and forgiving sympathy along the path of life, in the child's search for a place in life and for fundamental interests, ideas, ideals. It awakens and reinforces the powers of the mind and the conscience and provides the first basis for faith in God and knowing the true meaning of life as a basic foundation of support throughout a person's further development.

For these reasons, the occupation of being a mother is a full-time occupation and far more important than any other gainful employment. The occupation of mother is a vocation of immense significance, continuing its impact into the present and future of our people.

[...]

Source: Franz-Josef Wuermeling, "Die Familie von heute und ihre Erziehungskraft" ["Today's Family and its Child-Rearing Powers"], in *Bulletin* (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government), no. 238, December 21, 1961, pp. 2241-43, and no. 239, December 22, 1961, pp. 2249-51.

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