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In Defense of the Natural Family

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Social revisionists habitually describe the family unit consisting of parents and their biological or adopted offspring as the “nuclear” family. This is not an inaccurate description, for this basic pattern of relationships, starting with the marriage of a man and a woman and extending to their offspring, does form the nucleus of the larger extended family.

Nevertheless, the social revolutionaries have now routinely dismissed the nuclear family as an artifact of a bygone era—represented by 1950s situation comedies and what liberals dismiss as the “artificiality” of the postwar baby boom.

In more recent years, some defenders of the family now refer to the basic family unit as the “natural” family. This term properly identifies the natural arrangement of husband and wife, plus their offspring, as the most identifiable and important family unit for protection, nurture, and social stability. This is a healthy development, for even as the concept of the nuclear family has become less useful, the focus on the natural family clarifies issues considerably.

Now, family advocates Allan C. Carlson and Paul T. Mero have released “The Natural Family: A Manifesto,” a document that offers a comprehensive defense of the family, buttressed by an honest and insightful analysis of the threats now directed at the family as an institution.

The manifesto begins with a narrative of family life, beginning with a young man and a young woman who are drawn to each other and solemnize this bonding in the covenant of marriage. As Carlson and Mero explain, “The conjugal bond built on fidelity, mutual duty, and respect allows both of them to emerge into their full potential; they become as their Creator intended, a being complete.”

Of course, this marriage now creates a new family, identified in the manifesto as “the first and fundamental unit of human society.” This unit establishes a new economy as husband and wife “share the work of provisioning, drawing on each one’s interests, strengths, and skills.” As Carlson and Mero explain, “They craft a home which becomes a special place on earth. In centuries past, the small farm or the artisan’s shop was the usual expression of this union between the sexual and the economic. Today, the urban townhouse, apartment, or suburban home are more common. Still, the small home economy remains the vital center of daily existence.”

From the natural union of marriage “flows new human life.” Children are not seen as accidental impositions on the self-actualizing potential of the parents as individuals, but are instead understood as the first and most important gifts given to the conjugal bond. As the authors put simply: “Children are the first end, or purpose, of marriage.”

In picturesque language, Carlson and Mero describe the joys, sorrows, and challenges the young family will face. Parents direct their energies toward the protection, education, and nurture of the children even as the children move through skinned knees, first chores, and initial steps into the broader world. The mother and father “are the child’s first teachers; their home, the child’s first, most vital school.” The parents pass on to their children “the skills of living and introduce the satisfactions of talking, reading, reasoning, and exploring the world.”

From the protected context of the natural family, an extended family also emerges. Kin beyond the parents and children are welcomed into the family’s life and generations are bonded together in a common commitment to parents and generations to come. “Each generation sees itself as a link in an unbroken chain,” the authors explain, “through which the family extends from and into the centuries.”

As Carlson and Mero make clear, the natural family “opens the portals to the good life, to true happiness, even to bliss.” In the face of the family’s enemies, who routinely criticize the family as a limiting institution that represses individuality, Carlson and Mero understand that the mutuality and generosity of family life, propelled and formalized by mutual obligation, cements the family together in shared experiences and common goals. “Kindness begets kindness, shaping an economy of love. Kindred share all that they have, without expecting any return, only to receive more than they could ever have imagined,” the manifesto promises.

As touching and true as these passages are, this manifesto is important for the fact that it identifies the larger social context of family life. Carlson and Mero understand that the natural family is civilization’s most fundamental economic unit. Beyond this, they also understand that “political life also flows out of natural family homes.” More specifically, a just political life emerges out of the context of the natural family. As they explain, “True sovereignty originates here. These homes are the source of ordered liberty, the fountain of real democracy, the seedbed of virtue.” The extension of social life into neighborhoods, villages, and larger units does not replace the family nor supersede its value and importance. As the authors of this manifesto are bold to declare: “States exist to protect families and to encourage family growth and integrity.”

That last assertion is not likely to be found in the civics textbooks taught in America’s public schools, even in those rare school districts where something like civics continues as a part of the curriculum. More troubling, this assertion would be directly countered by the prevailing elite now mobilized among college and university faculties as revolutionaries ready to strip the family of its essential functions.

Carlson and Mero understand that the natural family now faces a dramatic crisis. In their words, the natural family “stands reviled and threatened in the early 21st century.” How bad is it? “Foes have mounted attacks on all aspects of the natural family, from the bond of marriage to the birth of children to the true democracy of free homes. Ever more families show weaknesses and disorders. We see growing numbers of young adults rejecting the fullness and joy of marriage, choosing instead cheap substitutes or standing alone, where they are easy prey for the total state. Too many children are born outside of wedlock, ending as wards of that same state. Too few children are born inside married-couple homes, portending depopulation.”

The manifesto identifies ideological revolutionaries as enemies of the natural family. As the authors assert, “Some political thinkers held that the individual, standing alone, was the true cell society; that family bonds—including those between husband and wife and between mother and child—showed merely the power of one selfish person over another. Other theorists argue that the isolated self, the lone actor in ‘the state of nature,’ was actually oppressed by institutions such as family and church. In this view, the central state was twisted into a supposed agent of liberation.”

The ideological enemies of the family include all those who would, whatever their motivation, strip the family of its functions, reduce the authority of parents, remove the social honor attached to marriage and family, and reassign family functions to the state and its ever-expanding bureaucracy. These social revolutionaries would include feminists, advocates of the welfare state, secularists, and social revisionists represented by developments such as the “children’s rights movement” and movements of sexual “liberation,” especially the homosexual rights movement.

These ideological forces gained considerable ground in recent decades, pushing changes in the law, social habits, the workplace, and the economy. The rise and rapid embrace of “no-fault” divorce laws and the imposition of marriage penalties in the system of taxation were tangible evidence of the family’s plight.

Carlson and Mero identify some of the most pernicious developments as “conscious efforts to drive the Creator out of civic life; the rapid spread of pornography; new demands for easy divorce; attacks on the meaning of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’; a swelling of rhetoric of ‘gender’ and ‘sexual’ rights; conscious state campaigns aimed at population control; steps toward easy abortion; claims of sexual revolution; rejection of the concepts of duty and long-term commitment; and startling advances in the manipulation of human life.

Yet, as damaging as these developments have been, there is more to this story. Carlson and Mero deserve credit for identifying “the triumph of industrialism” as one of the major social factors behind family decline. They explain, “Husbands, wives, and even children were enticed out of homes and organized in factories according to the principle of efficiency. Impersonal machines undermined the natural complementarity of the sexes in productive tasks. Children were left to fend for themselves, with the perception that their families no longer guided their future; rather, that children now looked to faceless employers.”

This last insight is particularly important, especially for today’s social conservatives. Carlson and Mero are true conservatives—they understand that the incredible economic transformations that have so reshaped human society over the past two centuries have effectively weakened the family unit. First, the father was taken out of the home or off of the farm in order to work in an industrialized setting. Before long, many wives followed, leaving children in the hands of state agents or unattended for much of the day. As a result, the role of the family as the first school and the first society was subverted by the very economic revolution that brought the promise of wealth and opportunity.

Conservatives must admit that today’s consumer culture poses direct threats to the stability and integrity of the family. In a quest for consumer goods, families are sacrificing time, attention, and energy. Once these are directed away from the family unit, other agents—the state in particular—enter the picture. Carlson and Mero go beyond mere description and analysis in their manifesto. They also issue a set of important principles and propose a platform for the recovery of the natural family.

Finally, they issue a call: “A new spirit spreads in the world, the essence of the natural family. We call on all people of goodwill, whose hearts are open to the promptings of this spirit, to join in a great campaign. The time is close in the persecution of the natural family, when the war against children, when the assault on human nature shall end.”

As Carlson and Mero see it, the enemies of the natural family are now on the defensive. They may be right. In truth, it may be too soon to tell. Nevertheless, the manifesto these authors have offered in defense of the natural family demands the attention of all those who would defend civilization’s most basic institution. This important document has emerged at just the right time.

