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Vatican
Francis, the comic strip
A family prays together before a meal in 2012 at their Chicago home. (CNS photo/Karen Calla

A family prays together before a meal in 2012 at their Chicago home. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World)

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April 29, 2022
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VATICAN CITY — Families play an important role in a society's development when ideologies are not imposed upon them, Pope Francis said.

The family is the "primary planter of the tree of gratuitousness," and when civilization "uproots" that gift, "its decline becomes unstoppable," the pope said April 29.

"I believe that there are certain conditions for rediscovering the beauty of the family. The first is to remove from the mind's eye the 'cataract' of ideologies that prevent us from seeing reality," he said.

Pope Francis addressed members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, who were holding a plenary meeting April 27-29 at the Vatican on the role of the family and "the challenge of love."

The family is "almost always at the top of the scale of values" for people around the world, the pope said, because "it is inscribed in the very nature of woman and man."

For this reason, marriage and the family are not "purely human institutions despite the many changes they have undergone over the centuries and the cultural and spiritual differences between peoples," he said.

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But, he said, families can become "isolated and fragmented in the context of society" when they are viewed "in an individualistic and private way, as is somewhat the case in the West."

When that happens, the pope said, "the social functions that the family exercises among individuals and in the community are lost, especially in relation to the weakest, such as children, persons with disabilities and the elderly."

Instead, families must continue to be "a place of welcome," especially "where there are fragile or disabled members," the pope said. In that way, they become an example of "love and patient endurance in life's difficulties."

Society, he added, also benefits from the example of adoptive and foster families.

"As we know, the family is the principal antidote to poverty, both material and spiritual, just as it is to the problem of demographic decline and irresponsible motherhood and fatherhood," he said.

Departing from his prepared remarks, the pope highlighted the "serious" nature of declining birthrates as well as "irresponsible" parenting, which he did not define.

"These two things are worth noting. The demographic winter is a serious matter," he said. "Here in Italy it is serious compared to other countries in Europe. It cannot be left aside, it is serious. And the irresponsibility of motherhood and fatherhood is another serious thing that must be addressed to help prevent it from happening."

Pope Francis said that through the help of other people and institutions, the family can become "a bond of perfection and a relational good the more it allows its own nature to flourish."

"A 'family-friendly' society is possible because society is born and evolves with the family," he said.