



*Articles*

FAMILY AND SELF-CONTROL: EVALUATING GOTTFREDSON  
AND HIRSCHI'S *GENERAL THEORY OF CRIME* IN THE  
CONTEXT OF CATHOLIC TEACHING

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*A paucity of studies address deeper dimensions of the influence of the family on crime. In A General Theory of Crime (1990), Hirschi and Gottfredson emphasize the significance of effective parenting in the development of high levels of self-control and less likely criminal involvement based on their view of human nature. The values-based social teachings of the Catholic Church that emphasize central themes of human and personal dignity, the common good, and communion of persons in the family and society, provide a basis to contribute to and develop the empirical significance of the family experience and parenting in the development of self-control, and establish a more validating basis for criminal justice policy.*

The family is endemic to human life and the development of person and society alike. Within the context of the principles of Catholic social thought, the family represents an experience rooted in deeply embedded moral values. Each person, created in the image of God, possesses inherent worth and has a responsibility for others. Furthermore, according to the Catholic perspective, the family is vital to the common good that is founded on a commitment to the needs and dignity of parent and child, and extends to one's network of social relationships in life.

Criminology includes family as a factor contributing to the explanation of criminal behavior, but a paucity of studies address the influence of family in its deeper dimensions. According to Sherman et al (1999), there is a need for further research to clarify for policy-makers how family factors are relevant to criminality.

In their *General Theory of Crime* (1990), Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi address family in more specific terms. They maintain that parenting is significant to the development of self-control that is a predictor of delinquent and criminal behavior.

Empirical support for the hypotheses of the theory has been consistent (Pratt and Cullen, 2000, p. 931; Unnever, Cullen, and Pratt, 2003, p. 472). At the same time, the capacity of any one theory to fulfill the promise to explain all crime must be questioned. (see Hay 2001)

This article, in general, attempts to establish a partnership between strongly supported criminological theory and religion. Specifically, it explores the relationship of family and child to crime, as developed by Gottfredson and Hirschi in their general theory and by supportive research, discusses the relevance of assessing this theoretical construct in terms of principles inherent in Catholic social thought, and identifies bases for further empirical inquiry pursuant to the Catholic view of the child as person and the family as an experience in self-giving.

### **Locating the General Theory of Crime within Criminology**

Multiple theoretical approaches in criminology attest to the complexity involved in attempting to explain criminal behavior (Siegel, 2003; Cullen and Agnew, 2003).

*The General Theory of Crime* reflects a social control theoretical emphasis. Unlike strain and learning theories that maintain that individuals are influenced by social environmental factors (e.g., poverty; crime-prone peers) to violate the law, control theorists begin with a different premise. They believe that human nature has a natural affinity to crime because it provides immediate gratification and doesn't require high levels of competency (Cullen & Agnew, 2003, p.223; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p.5). Therefore, control theorists explain crime not based on what influences individuals to violate laws or act defiantly, but rather why individuals conform to the law in the first place.

Strong social controls in a person's life are correlated to more likely conformity to conventional norms. In his classic work, *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), Hirschi introduced the idea of "social bonding" that encompasses four major elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. According to Cullen and Agnew (2003), this insight reflects Hirschi's "theoretical genius." In such a scheme, the person who is concerned about what others think, especially parents, commits himself or herself to perform well in school, obeys the law, engages in conforming behavior, and believes that such a pattern is the right thing to do, will be less likely to violate the law (p. 222).

Control theories also are aligned with social process theories that focus on the influence of socialization on criminal behavior. In this regard, the family institution is especially relevant because it presents a necessary social context for personal development (Siegel, 2003, p. 214). So, different structures or types, such as single income, dual career, or single parent families, are to be evaluated in terms of their

effect on the relationships between parents themselves and parents and children in those settings (Sampson & Laub, 1993, p. 19). Also, within such a perspective, parents who themselves engage in criminal behavior might impede their ability to supervise their children effectively (Hirschi and Petersilia, 1995, p. 122).

### **A General Theory of Crime**

Gottfredson and Hirschi assume a classical image of human nature based on an innate need for self-gratification. As a result, all persons are inclined to commit crime or act in a deviant manner. At the same time, however, such a tendency does not necessarily result in criminal behavior since good child-rearing practices can influence the development of one's self-control and affect the likelihood of criminal involvement in the future (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 117). In their rebuttal to a critique by Geis (2000), Gottfredson and Hirschi (2000) assert that their emphasis on the influence of low self-control permits the idea of crime to be addressed behaviorally rather than simply as a legal definition (p. 64).

At the same time, they dispute the classical belief that crime can be prevented by making the punishment of criminal behavior more harsh (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 85). They maintain that such a view lacks a more explicit idea of *why* a person acts in a socially non-conforming manner. To them, low levels of self-control account for a person's willingness to take a risk and engage in criminal behavior. In this sense, then, they question the deterrent effect of a system of punishment that is predominantly retributive.

A person with low self-control tends to be egotistical and self-centered, short-sighted, and oblivious to any debilitating effect of his or her behavior on others (Gottfredson and Hirschi, pp. 89-90). Research studies have found that low self-control influences delinquent and criminal behavior and that parenting practices mediate the effect of self-control on crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Gibbs and Giver, 1995; Gibbs et al, 1998; Pratt and Cullen, 2000; Hay, 2001; and Unnever et al, 2003). Harris et al (2002) also found that specific social and economic conditions, such as parents' educational levels, and single versus two-parent families, may reduce parental ability to provide adequate supervision to children. Therefore, the family can be a more or a less effective means for the child's development of self-control.

Within the context of family relationships, child-rearing practices are primary vehicles to develop self-control in the child. In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi, who describe such practices more

exclusively in regulatory terms and maintain that the effects of inadequate socialization at earlier stages in life are irreversible, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that individuals experience “transitions” in life, such as marriage or entry into the employment arena, that can provide strong social support to enhance self-esteem and influence both the level of self-control and the likelihood for involvement in crime (pp. 8-14). As a result, opportunities for change in one’s level of self-control are present throughout the life-course. Hay (2001) adds that values conveyed by parents also influence the child’s pattern of decision-making as an adult (pp. 711-712).

According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), ineffective parenting is a primary contributor to the persistence of impulsiveness and insensitivity of children into later years (p. 96). Effective parenting is characterized by an emotional attachment between parent and child (a trait closely aligned with “attachment” according to Hirschi’s earlier study); supervision that includes parental monitoring and an ability to recognize or be aware of a child’s behavior as violating “good conduct standards” in the home; and a willingness by parents to punish behavior that is deviant, when it occurs, at least by voicing disapproval (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, pp. 98-100).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the absence of positive parental role models and the faulty nature of the parent-child attachment, that can be aggravated by such conditions as poverty, constitute impediments to effective socialization of children (pp. 100-105).

### **The Family Factor in the General Theory of Crime: Research Development**

Research studies have contributed to further develop Gottfredson and Hirschi’s notion of “self-control.” For example, Gibbs et al (1995), in their scale to measure low self-control in a sample of university students, included such items as: “Rules are made to be broken” . . . “If it feels good, do it” . . . “Take your pleasure when and where you can get it” . . . “Eat, drink, and be merry sums up my philosophy of life” (p. 246). In addition, Harris et al (2002) found support that adolescents who have expectations for their future (e.g., in terms of education and health), indicative of a high level of self-control, will be less inclined to engage in risky behavior in the present (p. 1009).

Similarly, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s idea of child-rearing has been empirically supported (Wells and Rankin, 1988; Gibbs et al, 1998; Unnever et al, 2003). Additionally, Sampson and Laub (1993) established that family environments characterized by parental neglect

and conflict between parent and child, are relatively strong predictors of delinquent behavior (p.65). They further found by regression analysis that with increasing levels of supervision and attachment, delinquency reported by parent, teacher, or police decreased (p. 77). The importance of the role of parents is also emphasized by recent research which has established that effective parental control is enhanced by parents' involvement in activities with their children (Wright and Cullen, 2001).

The nature of parental discipline is pertinent to child behavior. For example, Wells and Rankin (1988) measured the variable "strictness of parental punishment" by an index to reflect how "strict" adolescent male respondents perceived their parents to be. The variable "punitiveness of parental punishment" was measured by an index to indicate "how vigorously and frequently parents punished their sons, ranging from yelling to hitting" (pp. 271-272, emphasis added). They found that parents' use of more punitive punishment does not necessarily correlate with lower levels of delinquent behavior. However, the perceived strictness of punishment is more consistently and negatively correlated to lower delinquency levels (p. 281). So, parental imposition of punishment that is harsh may have diminishing returns! According to Catholic teaching, punishment should not be driven by retribution, but imposed with the acknowledgement that all persons, including children, have value and the capacity to change attitudes and behavior. Sanctions, then, are not simply a response to behavior but to the person.

One other parenting trait is significant. Hay (2001) found that parenting that is "authoritative" rather than "authoritarian" more clearly and thoroughly demonstrates the effect that parental monitoring and discipline have on the development of self-control. The authoritative model includes parents' acceptance of their children, a reciprocal relationship between parent and child, parents' use of discipline that is perceived by children to be "fair," and parental restraint in the use of physical punishment such as hitting and slapping (p. 725).

According to Baumrind (1996), parents' acknowledgement that the child is "similar to, rather than alien from oneself" promotes the legitimacy of parental authority in the mind of the child (p.408). Authoritative parents make demands on children but also maintain a warm, reciprocal, and open relationship with them (p. 412). In this sense, parents function as role models for their children in the manner in which they practice their authority.

## **The Religious Factor: Catholic Social Teaching**

Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime and related research establish a sound empirical context that validates predictions based on Catholic social principles in regard to the relationship between parenting practices, self-control, and the likelihood of criminal behavior. At the same time, the Catholic perspective contributes a view of the child and family experience that can provide bases for further development of the relationship between parenting and self-control as predictors of delinquent and criminal behavior.

The themes and principles of Catholic social thought are rooted in values that have a divine source rather than being defined by public opinion. Therefore, within such a perspective, discussions about the nature and role of the family and its broader relationship to society will extend to the more universal application of those themes rather than being restricted by cultural and institutional dimensions (Wrenn, 1983, pp. xvii, xix).

Low self-control, as a theme in Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory, connotes the idea of an innate self-centeredness, insensitivity to others, and a lack of concern or realization of the social impact of one's behavior. The social teaching of the Catholic Church, however, establishes the significance of "human dignity" at the center of the Christian view of the child as a person and the family experience. This provides a foundation for further development of the idea of self-control. According to this principle, every human being possesses an inviolable character that is founded on shared dignity and worth as God's creation; and so, no one by nature is superior to anyone else. Such a focus on dignity also encompasses every person's right to self-respect and a responsibility to respect the dignity of others (*Pacem in Terris*, 1963, nos. 12-13; *Justitia in Mundo*, 1971, number 7; *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, number 19). This principle also acknowledges that all persons can change self-defeating and socially harmful attitudes and behavior. Everyone, by nature, then, shares a moral commitment to themselves and to others, both inside and outside of the family unit.

Gottfredson and Hirschi view the child as inherently self-centered and autonomous. Left alone, the child maintains an individualistic posture bent on self-satisfaction. In this secular scheme, the child may be viewed as separate from others and to the extent that "the existence of God is acknowledged, also separate from that God" (Stabile, 2004, p. 855). Such a view of the child promotes a definition of parenting that seeks more exclusively to monitor and regulate a child's self-centered behavior than to develop meanings to guide behavior based on a moral responsibility to self and others.

Catholic social thought opposes the secular view of the person that is presented in Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory. Rather than being self-indulgent by nature, the child as a person is defined by an awareness of self in relation to others to whom he or she has a responsibility. In its social teachings regarding the Christian family experience, the Church's religion-based view of the person is further revealed. For example, the family experience provides the initiation to love that reflects a valued sense of self necessarily responsible to others (and, as such, committed to social order) (*Centesimus Annus*, 1991, number 49). Significantly, the idea of love connotes more than affection. It suggests a sense of "self-giving" in contrast to "self-centeredness" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, number 18). The Catholic vision, then, presents a view of the person as communitarian by nature. In such a perspective, a deeper basis for the development of self-control is established, founded on a sense of self-worth and social responsibility. A child socialized to such an identity will be less likely to engage in opportunistic and self-aggrandizing patterns of delinquent and criminal behavior.

According to Catholic social teaching, the value, indeed the very meaning of the child, is not to be defined by one's "nationality, race, sex, economic status . . ." (USCCB, 1986, number 13). Nor can it be made subject to changing social and political ideologies that in different eras may inconsistently acknowledge the worth of any human being (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, nos.34-36; *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, nos. 4, 9, 12, 18).

The view of the child founded on the principles of Catholic social thought also provides a basis for further inquiry in the field of social psychology. According to self-determination theory, a person who is able to act on internalized motives or "reasons" that are interwoven into his or her self-image is more likely to behave in accord with goals related to those motives and to maintain such behavior over a longer period of time whether external factors (e.g., gaining others' approval or being aware that parents are watching) are present or not (Devine et al, 2002). Ryan and Connell (1989) add that individuals who are motivated by factors external to their sense of self do not act autonomously and may even require the presence of external rules or awareness of being monitored for regulated behavior to occur. These researchers cite empirical studies that further suggest that behavior driven by external factors, although a "relatively common form of self-control," is, at the same time, "*qualitatively different* from internally motivated, self-regulated behavior" (760, emphasis added).

The principles of Catholic social teaching, as applied to the vision of person and the structure of family experience, speak to that

qualitative difference. Christian self-identity, that encompasses both personal and social responsibilities, suggests that a child, raised in a family unit wherein these principles are proclaimed and practiced by household members, will be more likely to develop higher levels of self-control and a pattern of socially sensitive, law-abiding behavior that is self-driven.

Such a view necessarily extends to the nature and type of supervision and discipline that parents exercise over their children. Gottfredson and Hirschi describe effective parental supervision as founded on standards of regulation, which is consistent with their view of the child. Catholic social teaching emphasizes that effective parenting is based on a respect for and response to the human worth shared by parent, child, and all persons. In this view, irresponsible behavior does not define the nature of the child as person. Accordingly, parenting should be proactive as well as reactive in nature. Such a principle has its roots in sacred scripture where, for example, the parable of the Prodigal Son conveys a parent's love that is forgiving (Luke 15:11-32). And, in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, punishment is justified but must also be corrective and not simply retributive (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 68).<sup>2</sup>

Also, within the Catholic perspective, the child-parent bond is more than emotional and represents a child's admiration for his or her parents. In his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), Pope John Paul II affirmed that family relationships should be "guided by the law of 'free-giving' that bases one's human value on respecting and fostering personal dignity" (number 68). Therefore, effective parenting conveys a sense of acceptance and availability to children that, in turn, fosters unconditional love and justice and respect for others within the wider social setting. In his commentary on this apostolic exhortation, Reverend Monsignor George A. Kelly, Ph.D. states: "The relationships in the family are genuine only to the extent that they recognize the personal dignity of family members as images of God" (Kelly, 1982, p. 222). This view represents a further application of Baumrind's research (1996), discussed earlier, on parenting types.

Such a bonding experience influences parenting and the manner in which it is carried out. According to the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (Apostolican Aculositatem) (1965) of the Second Vatican Council, parental responsibilities extend beyond simply raising children physically to educating them to be responsible for "the material and spiritual needs of their neighbor" (number 30; also, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, number 69). A question emerges: what should children learn from parents to develop a Christian identity? In their commentary on the teachings of Pope John Paul II on marriage and family in the

modern world, Reverends Richard M. Hogan and John Lavoie (1985) succinctly describe the content of such teaching as revolving around respect for the “inviolable dignity of people for what they *are* and not for what they *have*” (p. 196, emphasis added). This also speaks to the nature of the child in Catholic thought: a person reared to appreciate human value on more than a material basis.

Within such a religious context, one’s sensitivity to others’ needs assumes a deeper meaning than civil respect. Acknowledging the worth of others based on what they are rather than what they materially possess reflects the view of the child in the Christian family experience: a person socialized to be his or her neighbor’s keeper! So the child will develop as an individual but with less egotistical and impulsive constraints. In this sense, a new element in the foundation of self-control is established.

### **The Christian Family and the Development of Self-Control**

A Christian family experience is vital to the development of high levels of self-control by its focus on recognition of shared human worth and self-giving rather than an egocentric individuality (*Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, nos. 17-18, 22, 45; also *Redemptor Hominis*, 1979, number 21). Parenting practices within such a context seek to establish a more extended basis for obedience by children than developed by Gottfredson and Hirschi (see *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, number 48).

The emphasis that Catholic social teaching places on “unselfishness” provides an opportunity to understand deeper dimensions of “self-control” in relation to a vision of the child and parenting practices. In the context of criminological theory as developed by Gottfredson and Hirschi, effective parenting contributes to a lower degree of self-centeredness and impulsiveness that translates to high levels of self-control and less likely involvement in criminal behavior. Catholic social teaching adds that the behavior of a person who possesses a high level of self-control is founded on a family experience of selfless love that acknowledges the worth and fallibility of all persons, rudiments of a Christian identity. It can be hypothesized, therefore, that a child’s unwillingness to engage in risky and self-centered behavior is influenced by his or her view of self that necessarily encompasses a relationship to others. And, in such a family unit, parental response to the dignity of personhood in children necessitates parents’ acknowledgement of their own human worth. Accordingly, parental discipline is determined by a child’s responsibility to self and others

rather than more exclusively as a means to regulate the child's behavioral acts that are symptomatic of low self-control.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's view of effective parenting is consistent with their understanding of the child as inherently resistive to other-centered behavior. Punishment then becomes retributive in nature: a disciplinary experience to regulate the child's natural impulsive tendencies. In the perspective of Catholic social thought, the meaning of the child is to be found in the necessary connection of the child to others. So, while Baumrind (1996) and Hay (2001), as discussed previously, identify a structure of parenting that is authoritative rather than authoritarian, to complement Gottfredson and Hirschi's development, the principles of Catholic social thought provide the content.

The family, however, is not to be construed as an isolated, composite group of people who contribute almost exclusively to one another's emotional, moral, and behavioral development. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society, and undertakes its social role" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, number 42). While the negative correlation between low levels of self-control and criminality, mediated by effective parental monitoring, is effectively supported empirically, the societal impact of family and parenting is not more fully developed in the *General Theory of Crime* or in criminological studies that have tested it.

Catholic social teaching reflects a broad, moral basis of the family experience. Such an emphasis is reflected in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

How family members learn to relate to each other with respect, love, caring, fidelity, honesty, and commitment becomes their way of relating to others in the world. (*A Family Perspective*, 1988, p. 20.)

The child, exposed to such an experience in socialization, may be more apt to develop a community-minded outlook. In this regard, the effects of self-containment, reflective of low self-control and more likely involvement in criminality, can be mitigated.

This extension of the significance of the family experience beyond the family unit relates to the idea of social order that is defined by a second basic principle of Catholic social teaching, the Common Good. The idea of the common good is rooted in the community of people who are committed to each other as creatures of God (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, number 137; USCCB, 1986, nos. 13-14).

So, a well-ordered society requires men and women to recognize and observe the rights and needs of one another (*Pacem in Terris*, 1963, number 31). The common good is compromised by self-centered behavior that Gottfredson and Hirschi attribute to low self-control.

This principle however suggests more than the absence of conflict and deviant behavior. In a statement that counters liberalism in the modern world, Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), reiterated a theme developed by his predecessor, Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*: “Government must not be thought of as a mere guardian of law and order” but must “permit the development of the public and the individual” (number 25). In this regard, subsidiarity argues for allocation of governmental resources to facilitate the family’s function. As a result, the development of both individual and society is enhanced. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, number 25) So Catholic social teaching establishes a vital connection between the development of an “other-centered” aspect of the child’s identity and a social order that is driven by a developmental sense of respect for self and others.

According to the Catholic perspective, the inherent value of the person transcends the limits of changing socio-political definitions. A society that lacks a deeper values orientation may more likely politicize the theme of human dignity and apply it only inconsistently in policies governing social life. In regard to the family environment, the value of the person becomes contingent on changing ideologies. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II developed the inviolable value of human life not only in relation to the rights of the unborn and all disenfranchised people, but in relation to every person and at all times. It is such a focus that is endemic to a Christian experience of socialization.

What must now be emphasized further is that the child as person with dignity is, at the same time, fallible. In the Catholic perspective, the capacity for self-reform is inherent in the idea of human worth. In Gottfredson and Hirschi’s general theoretical perspective and classical view of human nature, effective parenting practices regulate behavior of the child, who is by nature potentially self-indulgent. Catholic social teaching maintains a view of the child who, as the product of a Christian family experience, develops individuality but does so in terms of a respect for and responsibility to self and to others.

In this regard, the principles of Catholic social thought also are visionary in another respect. The responsibilities of parent to child and child to parent, and to those outside the family unit, are founded on more than a legal commitment (Hogan & Levoir, 1985, p. 42). The law typically is defined in terms of individual rights and freedom by

unbounded autonomy. In pluralistic, modern secular society, such a view appears logical. In fact, Gottfredson and Hirschi's idea of parenting that regulates the behavior of the child is consistent with this view. However, theological anthropology provides a developmental insight to the way legal relationships, and thus human freedom, can be defined: individual rights must be in proportion to one's responsibilities to others and encompass "giving oneself away." Such an extended perspective is less likely to impede the common good and a healthy family experience that is founded on the self-sacrifice (or love) of its members (Coughlin, 2000, 625-626). The Catholic view of the child is a necessary outcome of this development.

A child socialized within a Christian family and parenting experience views self, others, and social norms of conduct in a distinctive fashion. In such a process, one's evaluation of self is at least, in part, influenced by recognition of others, family members and acquaintances, who affirm and convey Catholic social and moral values. The child is nurtured to acknowledge his or her human tendency to act wrongfully but, at the same time, to affirm his or her inherent value as a person as well as the value of all people. So, respect is warranted regardless of social and economic status, or the delinquent or criminal nature of one's behavior. Furthermore, such respect extends to the life, dignity, and property of others. Or, in other words, exploiting or manipulating or injuring others, personally or property-wise, is irreconcilable in such a scheme.

Rules and laws also assume a more than regulatory meaning and function. They are guides to provide for the common good that is founded on social responsibility. The child as a person, then, develops the ability to distinguish the inherent worth of human persons from the nature of human behavior. Parents who model themselves on such values for their children convey the significance of following right rules of conduct.

In this regard, compliance to rules and laws is founded on more than avoiding the imposition of sanctions. While delinquent and criminal behavior are often carried out by individuals and groups who are socially and economically disadvantaged, such conduct typically is facilitated by sub-cultural norms that support reacting to conditions of perceived or real inequality at any cost! The Christian family experience provides the ground for the child to learn to act based on what family members of social and moral conscience think and attempt to practice. At the same time, it offers an outlook that can be a basis to deter one from the adverse effects of peer and subcultural norms, and serves to develop Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory of parenting and self-control beyond its classical and regulatory emphasis.

Other changes in the institution of family in the modern world, most notably the relation of work to family life, also affect the socialization of the child. In the *General Theory of Crime*, such trends as dual-career family households in American society, that now represent more than fifty-percent of all married-couple families, represent potential impediments to the effectiveness of child-rearing and the development of high levels of self-control. In his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work, 1981), Pope John Paul II identified broader implications. Work not only enables a person to contribute to the social environment but also to fulfill one's potential as a valued human being. The emphasis of Catholic social teaching is that work should not displace the nature of the family as an enriching communion of persons. Prioritizing work over family would compromise the vital relationship between parent and child, and impede the development of self-control. The challenge to dual career and single-parent families is to engage in parenting practices that reflect the principles underlying the Christian family experience and vision of the child as a person.

## **Conclusions**

Gottfredson and Hirschi establish an empirically sound theory regarding the relationship between family and crime. Specifically, they emphasize the significance of effective parenting in the development of high levels of self-control in the child that translates to less likely involvement in delinquent and criminal behavior. Underlying the theory is a view of the child as self-centered by nature and in need of parental monitoring. Hence the basis of effective parenting is the regulation of the child's behavior.

This article argues that the principles of Catholic social thought provide bases to develop a view of the child more distinctively in conjunction with a Christian family experience that can explain less likely involvement in crime, as follows:

1. Catholic social thought extends the view of the child beyond Gottfredson and Hirschi's emphasis on an inherent self-centeredness that accounts for low levels of self-control. Such a secularized image portrays the child in individualistic, autonomous terms and identifies parental supervision as the vehicle to regulate behavior that impedes a civil order. According to the Catholic perspective, the child is capable of engaging in wrongful behavior but also develops an awareness

of the relationship of self to others and to God who, as Creator, is the source of the human value shared by all people. In essence, then, a distinction can be made between the inviolable dignity of the human person and human behavior that can be socially and morally wrong.

2. The Christian family experience in general and parenting in particular serve as essential elements in the socialization of the child. In this perspective, new research dimensions for the development of self-control in the perspective of Catholic social science are suggested. Catholic social teaching presents a view of the child that includes other-centeredness as a necessary correlate to one's self-identity and personal dignity. Research is warranted that explores whether effective socialization to develop and internalize such a view more likely results in a continued pattern of law-abiding behavior, whether surveillance is present or not. Also, what is the effect on a child's behavior of teaching respect for what a person is rather than what a person possesses materially? As a corollary, what factors motivate a child's involvement in community-minded programs in school? And, to what degree will the child so involved be less likely to engage in delinquent behavior? Within a Christian family experience, it is hypothesized that a child will be more likely to subordinate his or her self-interests for the good of others and be guided by the needs of self in relation to others both in adolescence and early adulthood. The result will be a high level of self-control that is founded on more than monitoring, is autonomous in nature, and predictive of less likely involvement in criminality.

3. The nature of parental discipline is necessarily influenced by the view of the child. According to the Catholic perspective, the child is deserving of more than retribution. In contrast to the child-rearing model operationalized by Gottfredson and Hirschi, that focuses on the need to monitor the behavior of children who are by nature considered self-centered, what vision of the child contributes to parenting that is "authoritative" rather than "authoritarian" and "strict" and "fair" rather than "harsh"? Such empirical inquiry can serve to clarify the relationship between parental view of the child and the type of parenting practiced. This can further reinforce the idea of partnership that can be established between Catholic social principles and social scientific criminological theory.

4. If Christian parenting is a response to the inherently worthy child who also is fallible, then it is correctional in nature. To make a broader application, what relevance can the central themes of Catholic social thought have on “corrections” as an organizational system? In an evaluation of the criminal justice system in America today, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops stated that the system would work more effectively if punishment were (re)defined to include rehabilitation and reform rather than being predominantly dependent on retribution and control. (USCCB, 2000) Accordingly, what would the structure of correctional and community supervision programs look like based on more than a retributive premise, and predicated on a Christian view of person?

There is a need to explore the relationship between family and crime more deeply in terms of a view of the child and family. This theme has been obscured during the last thirty years. Based in part on a certain disillusionment regarding the country’s response to crime in the 1960s and 1970s, the criminal justice system redefined its theoretical and philosophical emphases from a positivistic and rehabilitative approach to crime to a more classical model, with a focus on retribution. Today, punishment both systemically and popularly is more likely to be associated with determinate and guideline sentence systems that focus no longer on the offender but on the offense (Tonry, 1999). Mandatory sentencing of certain offenses maintains a similar theme: Let the punishment fit the crime.

At the same time, while a rate of decline in crime has been evident, so has a continued increase in the jail and prison population in the United States that presently totals more than two million inmates. (“Prison Statistics,” 2003) These outcomes, while arguably insuring a greater sense of public safety, serve to justify strategies to control crime and only tolerate, at best, inquiries regarding the prevention of crime.

In a socio-political climate that has been dominated by an insistence on retribution that, strictly interpreted, de-emphasizes or avoids the significance of family in relation to crime, there are subtle signs of change that suggest a renewed interest in the social aspects of crime. The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *U.S. v. Booker* (2005), that invalidated the mandatory nature of Federal sentencing guidelines, enables judges to impose sentences with more discretion. Perhaps the mantra, “Let the punishment fit the crime” will be redefined as “Let the punishment both fit the crime and the offending person whose self-identity in relationship to others can be restored.” In this context, the opportunity to reassess criminal behavior in terms of the influence of the

Christian family experience may be a consequence (Also, see Hulse and Liptak, 2005).

The significance of family in criminological theory has been empirically established and developed. Catholic social teaching reveals deeper dimensions of the issue—the vision of the child as person in relationship to others; the communitarian responsibility inherent in family and parenting; and the significance of high levels of self-control that can be established by more than a decrease in self-centered behavior. The empirical development and application of such knowledge, within the ideological context of the contemporary criminal justice system, present remaining challenges.

### Notes

1. Gottfredson and Hirschi's statement reveals a potentially significant legal dilemma regarding parental autonomy in disciplining children. According to Gregory (2002), "the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child wrongfully confers upon children equal status with that of adults. It denies the reality that children are not adults" (p.147).

2. The Church's emphasis on rehabilitation of the offender as a central *purpose* of criminal punishment is open to criticism. One can argue that strict retribution should not justify punishment in the human life experience, but will only be relevant at the "final time of retribution," when divine punishment will be sought for its own sake – the restoration of the universal moral order. (Falvey, 2004 ) As a result, rehabilitation can be maintained as a *justification* for punishment in present life experience while retribution remains its ultimate purpose.

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