

Carlson, Allan C. and Paul T. Mero. *The Natural Family: a Manifesto*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2007. 271 pages. \$27.95 hardcover.

In a perfect world, there would be no need for a book like *The Natural Family*. In a perfect world, people would know that a child benefits most from having a father as well as a mother. In a perfect world, the needs of the child would always take precedence over the interests or desires of the parents. And, in a perfect world, public policy would find ways to support the best interests of the child. But, Allan Carlson and Paul Mero, the authors of *The Natural Family*, know that we do not live in a perfect world, and they have written what they call “a manifesto” to remind us that the family—including a father, mother and children—is the “natural and fundamental” unit of society.

Indeed, Carlson and Mero reject the Marxist-inspired assault on the family that began in the 1960s, and are especially harsh on those who should have defended marriage: the left-leaning clergy, the social-service workers, and academics who joined the assault itself by “adopting the very assumptions—philosophical, social and economic—which have almost extinguished the family’s traditional legal and social privileges.” The authors start with their own assault on the Marx-Engels manifesto which had called for the family’s end as an economic unit and for the elimination of the concept of legitimacy. And they conclude with a plan for a restoration of the family. Throughout, the family manifesto provides a compelling argument in favor of the need to begin to pay attention to the need to “celebrate” the natural family.

Celebrating the natural family, the authors cite data from a number of studies that demonstrate that children raised in two-parent families are happier, healthier, wealthier, perform better in school, and are more successful later in life both in careers and their own marriages. And, although the data are interesting and help support the thesis of the book, the far more compelling chapters are those that focus on the origins, expression, and gifts of the natural family.

While Carlson and Mero are critical of those who have attempted to destroy the family, *The Natural Family* is an optimistic book that promises readers “a way to rebuild a culture of freedom, joy and love.” In a chapter entitled “The Bulwark of Liberty,” Carlson and Mero recognize the natural family as “part of the created order, imprinted on our natures, the source of bountiful joy, the fountain of new life, and the bulwark of liberty.” They remind readers that people of biblical faith—Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—find the origins of

the family chronicled in the Old Testament. In Genesis, Carlson and Mero remind us, marriage is affirmed as both sexual and economic. And they argue that throughout history in all cultures, from the most primitive to the most civilized societies, we find the family consisting of parents and children, with the father as its protector. Marriage bound this family system together, uniting a regulated sexual relation with economic obligation.

But, for many contemporary families, the economic obligation was severed from the sexual and the procreative functions of the family as public policy drove families apart and the government assumed more and more responsibility for the economic health of families. The results have been devastating. The authors remind us that as far back as 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan had warned that a community where a large number of young men grow up in broken families dominated by women is bound to become chaotic. The absence of fathers, he wrote, would have devastating consequences. Moynihan was correct, but, as Carlson and Mero point out, the response to Moynihan's warnings from his academic colleagues and political peers was to accuse the senator of "blaming the victims of poverty" for their own plight. And, as a result, social scientists helped lawmakers create policies that ignored the needs of families in favor of individual rights. They created policies that made fathers expendable and in many cases, forced women with young children into the workforce. These lawmakers and their supporters viewed the family as "as an agent of repression, fear, and adherence to a stifling past ... They offered freedom to the individual. They elevated the individual to the role of supreme actor in society, the cell of the body politic, the standard by which public actions would be judged." But, the biggest losers in this individualism were the children.

To begin to address this individualism, Carlson and Mero's platform builds on lessons learned from past episodes of family reconstruction. They admire what they see as the achievements of the American family model in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Between 1935 and 1965, the marriage rate climbed, the marital birthrate soared, the divorce rate fell after 1946, and measures of familial happiness rose. And, although all of these gains were lost in the next fifteen years as Marxism re-emerged, coupled with feminism, "no-fault" divorce, and a destructive welfare policy, the authors note that if public policy had been more responsive to the real needs of the family, the illegitimacy and family disruption rates we face today might not have occurred.

To help reverse these trends, Carlson and Mero provide concrete policy suggestions. For example, they assert that governments

should reintroduce fault into laws governing divorce. They ask that the government recognize that strong families commonly rest on religiously grounded morality systems which deserve autonomy and respect as vital aspects of civil society. They suggest that income tax exemptions for children and child tax credits should be greatly expanded, indexed to inflation and made universally available to families. They also suggest that state subsidies and credits for daycare should be extended to families who care for their preschoolers full time at home. And they ask that home education be protected. There are others, all of them involving ways to support parents in truly parenting their children.

It is difficult to say whether these suggestions will be adopted by lawmakers. The powerful pro-choice feminist lobby that continues to diminish the role of the father, coupled with the strength of the gay advocacy movement that demands access to marriage (in spite of what might be best for children) continue to provide a challenge to the pro-family policies that need to be passed. Still, it appears that Carlson and Mero have an ally in the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XIV recently ushered in the New Year by giving a speech which criticized policies that undermine the traditional family. Suggesting that these policies have eroded families as “one of the most important foundations for peace in the world,” Pope Benedict decried the “false glorification or even defilement of the body and the banalization of sexuality,” and decried the “multiple challenges related to the consumer mentality and secularization that face the faithful and men of goodwill.” And, as Carlson and Mero maintain throughout their book, Pope Benedict argued that the traditional family, led by a husband and wife, instilled values that promote peace and that it was an irreplaceable institution. It is this optimistic vision of the “natural family” that offers the best chance to create a better world for our children.

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