

result is not only good for children, it is vital to the future of the whole community.

Is it possible to do a better job building a stronger marriage culture among Catholics?

Yes. We can take inspiration from other religious groups who are fighting the same de-constructing forces in the public culture.

The family is the prime evangelizer, one of the most powerful incubators of religious faith and identity. Christianity grew from a tiny group in Jerusalem to the faith of the Roman Empire in just 300 years. Playing no small part in this rise was Christian sexual ethics which, unlike secular Roman ethics, forbade infanticide, contraception, and non-marital sexuality, and discouraged family disruption and desertion.

If the Church community succeeded in finding the energy and means to transmit a Catholic vision of marriage and family only to churchgoing Catholics and their children, so that they became ten percent more likely to marry, stay married, and have children who grow up with a similar commitment to building families, both the Church and the public square would be transformed within thirty years.

We can and must inspire, re-educate, serve, and protect those Catholics who want to recommit to a Catholic vision of marriage and family. The next generation is watching. They need to see us confidently defend marriage in the pews and in the public square.

In this context, the three most urgent tasks for the Church are to:

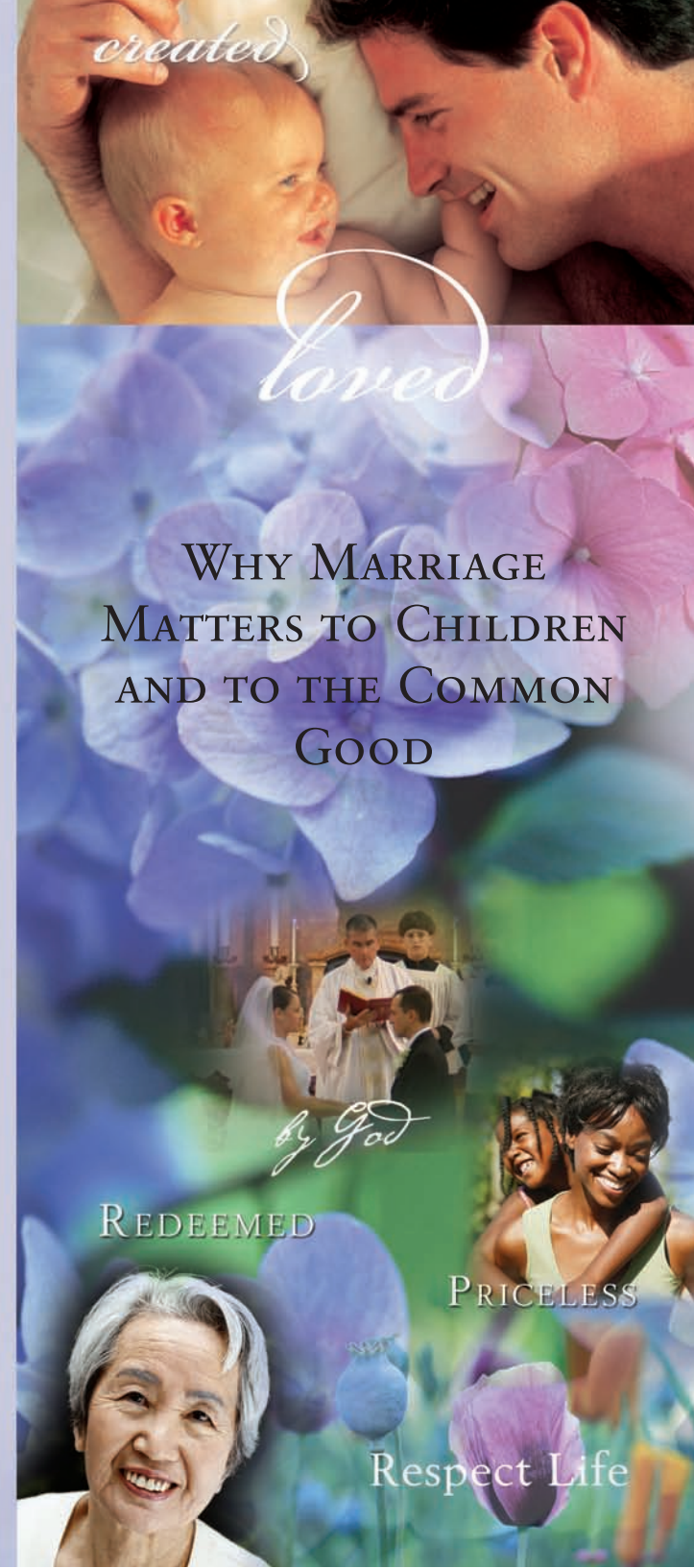
- a. affirm the value of children in the mind of the Catholic community
- b. develop ministries and programs to help distressed couples avoid divorce and rebuild loving marriages
- c. help, support, and teach Catholic parents seeking to transmit their marriage vision to their own children, in the face of an increasingly confused and hostile public square.

The task in renewing marriage is no less than to renew, for this generation and the next, faith in love. Human beings desperately want to believe that our deepest drives and longings have a purpose, that they are directing us toward love, goodness, renewal. In marriage, men and women come together in faith to make the future happen. These are not private and personal matters, but the shared urgent business of the entire community.

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For Catholics marriage is a sacrament, revealing Christ's indestructible love. The Catholic tradition has always recognized that marriage is also a natural relationship. People of any faith or none can marry, and their marriages matter to God, to each other, to their children, and to the community.

A group of respected marriage and family scholars recently met to document the social science evidence that marriage matters. While there are, of course, single parents who do a splendid job of child-rearing under very difficult circumstances, the scholars reached these conclusions among others:

**Marriage reduces the risk of poverty for children and communities.** The majority of children whose parents don't marry or don't stay married experience at least a year of poverty.

**Fatherless households increase crime.** Boys whose parents divorced or never married are two to three times more likely to end up in jail as adults.

**Marriage protects children's physical and mental health.** Children whose parents marry and stay married are healthier and much less likely to suffer mental illness, including depression and teen suicide.

**Both men and women who marry live longer, healthier, and happier lives.** On virtually every measure of health and well-being, married people are better off.

### **Cohabiting is not the same as marriage.**

Couples who just live together without the commitment of marriage do not get the same boost to health, welfare, and happiness, on average, as spouses. Children whose parents cohabit are at increased risk for domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect.

**Parents who don't marry or stay married put children's education at risk.** Children whose parents divorced or never married have lower grade-point averages, and are more likely to be held back a grade, and to drop out of school.

**When marriages fail, ties between parents and children typically weaken, too.** In one large national survey, 65 percent of adult children of divorce reported they were *not* close to their fathers (compared to 29 percent of adults from intact marriages).

Any development that weakens the norms of the married family will increase all these risks to children and to the communities in which these children live. An impressive number of studies confirm that individual children are more likely to engage in criminal conduct when raised in fatherless households.

Relatively little is known from a scientific standpoint about how children fare when raised by same-sex couples. After reviewing several hundred studies, University of Virginia sociologist Steven Nock concluded: "[N]ot a single one of those studies was conducted according to generally accepted standards of scientific research."

Children raised by same-gender couples remain a social experiment, about which we can say little with scientific certainty.

### *Marriage Matters for the Good of Society*

Reconnecting marriage with its great historic cross-cultural task of encouraging men and women to beget and raise the next generation has never been a more urgent priority. On the one hand, a large majority of modern democracies are now experiencing very low birthrates, amid increasingly urgent concern about the social, economic, and political consequences.

As the eminent legal scholar and religious historian John Witte notes: "Procreation ... means more than just conceiving children. It also means rearing and educating them for spiritual and temporal living. ... The good of procreation cannot be achieved in this fuller sense simply through the licit union of husband and wife in sexual intercourse. It also requires maintenance of a faithful, stable, and permanent union of husband and wife for the sake of their children."

Marriage is also important for the inter-generational transmission of faith. Getting married, staying married, building loving marriages, and having children are the principle means through which a community propels itself into the future. When a nation or faith community succeeds in transmitting a powerful vision of marriage to the next generation, the