



A few years ago, when I worked as a catechist in Rome, I was teaching on the topic of the Annunciation. I took advantage of the occasion to speak a bit on Jesus' earthly family. At one point in the discussion, one of the children declared, "My greatest fear is that my parents will get a divorce".

After her statement, the other children commented, one after another, "That's my fear too!" And every single one of them said that.

There were ten children in the class, which isn't exactly a sample vast enough for us to make the claim that "all children's greatest fear is the separation of their parents". However, that one episode did make me think.

I'm no psychologist or pediatrician, but I began to reflect on how children do not come separately from one father or one mother, but from the union of both. No law, no ideology can change this reality.

Without judging those who have found divorce to be the only solution to their problems, we shouldn't forget that divorce is traumatic for the children involved.

## **Separation: Source of Suffering for Spouses and Children**

The end of marriage is always a source of suffering and hardship. This reality, often minimized, should be the starting point, rather than the end point, of a reflection on the subject.

Two people who get married nourish hopes and dreams about their union, with varying degrees of consciousness. It's assumed that if two people decide to get married, it is because they believe and hope to spend the rest of their lives together.

Whatever the reasons may be that lead to a separation, it is certain that in each case

there is a falling out that creates wounds. But what happens when divorce happens between those who have children? How do the children live the experience of their parents' separation? Many people believe that children can grow well even with separated parents; what counts for the child is their mommy or daddy's love for them, not the love they have for each other. But is this so?

### Fighting: The First Cause of Pain

Many psychologists agree that children grow better with separated parents than in an atmosphere of conflict between the parents who live together. Dr. Marco Schneider, psychologist and family psychotherapist, and Dr. Stefania Ferrari, psychologist and family mediator, are of this belief. According to a study they had conducted, there would be a close correlation between the conflict among parents (who are together or separated) and the psychological damage of the children. Their conclusion is that it is thus more important that parents not remain in a situation of conflict rather than remain together at all costs.

There are extreme situations for which separation provides the only way out. In the general audience of Wednesday June 24, 2015, Pope Francis stated, "There are cases in which separation is inevitable, and there are times when it may even be morally necessary." He continued by saying that there are even oppressive situations "when it is a matter of removing the weaker spouse or young children from the gravest wounds caused by abuse and violence, by debasement and exploitation, by neglect and indifference."

### The Ideal Environment is Still the United Family

Even though the first causes of hurt in children are conflict and violence, we cannot forget that divorce itself, even when lived in apparent harmony, produces wounds in children.

Children are a fruit of union; they do not come from two separated persons. This, on the

biological and anthropological level cannot be considered an irrelevant fact. Children, coming from that union, naturally seek protection in it and want to participate in it.

Children do not only prefer to live with both parents, rather than go from one house to the other, but they are happy to see that their mom and dad love each other. To be raised in a united family helps them to gain security and trust in human relationships.

### Parents' Relationship: The First Relational Model for Children

We can't forget the fact that children learn how to relate to others, including their future spouses, from the relationship they developed with their parents and saw between their parents. A person who has witnessed the breakdown of his/her own family can be reluctant to believe in solid and lasting relationships, and have a tough time with serious commitment because they fear relationships, though perhaps unconsciously.

There are many difficulties that can arise from these situations which, in each case, are perceived by the child as abnormal conditions. This is demonstrated in a study conducted by the Center of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy ( Centro de Psicología Clínica y Psicoterapia).

### Love among Spouses: A Good for the Children

A man and woman become father and mother together. A child who sees that his father loves his mother and vice a versa can more easily discover what love is.

But those who have failed in the task of showing the marvels of spousal love are not stigmatized. Condemning someone from the outside is as easy as it is unjust.

Those who are undertaking the mission of becoming parents, however, must remember that cultivating love is not just a good for themselves, but also for the children. It's a completely different experience when children see their parents living a fruitful, peaceful, and harmonious relationship and when they endure their parents' fighting until the day of definitive division.