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2nd October, 2009

100/2009

High profile scholars from Europe, the US and the Middle East to address a colloquium on Marriage and the family

On the 6th and the 7th of October, 2009, a dozen of global family scholars and practitioners from Europe, the United States and the Middle East are meeting in the Presidential Palace in Valletta for a colloquium highlighting the importance of strengthening marriage and the family. They will be presenting on topical issues related to marriage and the family putting a strong emphasis on family policy and how family well being is beneficial for society in general.

The Cana Movement , Malta in collaboration with the Centre for Family Studies at the University of Malta have been working over the past year to organize this world class colloquium The funding body for this event is the Doha Institute for Family Studies based in the Middle East (Doha, Qatar). The vision of this Institute is to establish a global study centre that will provide the region and the world with academic research, interdisciplinary studies and policy initiatives to support the efforts of governments, international organisations, UN agencies and civil societies to develop and implement family development plans, policies and programs. This colloquium is very much in line with the vision of the Doha Institute.

Venue

The event will take place in the House of Representatives which is located in the sumptuous Presidential Palace, built by the Knights of Malta in the capital city of Valletta. It will be held under the auspices of the Social Affairs Committee of the Maltese House of Representatives and will take place in the Hall where the Committee conducts its day to day work. His Excellency the President of the Republic, Dr George Abela who has worked as a family lawyer for many years will be opening the Colloquium himself.

The Purpose of the Colloquium

The purpose of the colloquium is to attract broad support that strengthening marriage and the family is good for society. Malta is very well placed to promote this idea because both the Nationalist party in

government and the Labour party in opposition believe in the importance of a healthy marriage and the family as a cornerstone of society.

This thesis is being put forward in the context of current world-wide trends that affect marriage, parenting and family life in general. The shift from a more institutional, traditional model of marriage to a more companionate model of marriage in response to the increase in maternal employment and dual earner families, smaller families and, greater individualism need to be taken into account.

The Presentations

Professor Karen Bogenschneider, a Rothermel-Bascom Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Family Policy Specialist at University of Wisconsin-Extension will deliver her keynote presentation on the first day. In her presentation family policy will be discussed as an efficient investment of public resources, an effective means of promoting positive child and youth development, and a normative ideal held by policymakers and the public that has the potential to foster political consensus and build common ground. Based on interviews of research-minded policymakers and policy-minded researchers, several pragmatic strategies will be discussed for how policymakers and professionals can build evidence-based policies that strengthen and support families.

Professor Jan Walker , Emeritus Professor of Family Policy and Strategic Research Advisor in the Institute of Health and Society at Newcastle University is the keynote speaker for the second day of the colloquium. She will focus on marriage, parenting , the protection of children's best interests and the role of the State. She will argue that a greater understanding of the stresses and strains facing parents should enable policies to be developed which focus less on indicating how people should live their lives and sanctioning parents when they fail to meet their obligations and more on improving communication between family members and enhancing the quality of relationships. Given that children thrive best in families characterised by consistent care which is closely associated with stable and harmonious relationships between parents, this presentation will review the research evidence and suggest ways in which more operationalised support might protect the best interests of children and adults.

Another nine leading experts will present more specifically on topics which are indispensable to a healthy family environment . Given that we wanted to give this colloquium a policy slant, all of these scholars hailing from Europe, America and one from the Middle East will finish the presentation by proposing a number of policy proposals related to their particular area of study.

Clinical psychologist and family therapist Janine van Lawick, from the Loretthuis,in Haarlem the Netherlands will discuss couple and family dynamics in the context of domestic violence . Her presentation will end with policy proposals on how domestic violence can be addressed.

Professor Paul Amato, who is the Arnold and Bette Hoffman Professor of Family Sociology and demography at Pennsylvania State University and recipient of many distinguished awards will be addressing the effects of divorce on children and their parents from an American as well as a European

perspective. Towards the end of his presentation, he will elicit a number of proposals for policy emanating from his research.

Families living in poverty must also claim their rightful place on the family policy agenda. Marie Cécile Renoux, permanent delegate in the European Union on behalf of ATDQuart Monde, an international nongovernmental organization working with poor families, will help us think about families living on the margin of society. Extreme poverty has serious repercussions on family life, including the separation of children from their parents. This is extremely traumatic for children and very often marks them for life. ATDQuart Monde has long been fighting for children who are often deprived of such vital relationships with their parents in spite of the fact that this goes against the rights recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This volunteer will provide us with engaging narratives of how best to support parents including fathers and their children to remain united and take charge of their lives.

Dottoressa Letizia Tanturri from the University of Pavia will analyse the decline in population growth in Europe. Why is it that we are having less babies on the European continent? This demographic trend is undoubtedly the result of many complex phenomena that young couples have to grapple with today.

Another world wide trend affecting marriage, parenting and family life is the influence of modern technology, especially the media and the internet. The effect this is having on the relationship between children and their parents will be explored. How can we address this issue from a policy perspective ? Dr Monica Whitty will be answering this topical question.

We would also like to take note of two opposing trends related to men and fathers. On the one hand we are placing a greater emphasis on the importance of fatherhood, and how beneficial it is that fathers become more involved in child rearing. On the other hand the increase in non- marital births (including the high rate of teenage pregnancy) as well as divorce has led to more marginalization of men and fathers from family life and a huge increase in the numbers of single parent families. Professor Michael Lamb, who is an eminent scholar, head of the Department on Social and Developmental Psychology at the University of Cambridge will explore the role of fathers in child development.

Professor Frank Fincham whose current position is that of Eminent Scholar at Florida State University where he serves as Director of its Family Institute, has been listed among the top 25 psychologists in the world in terms of impact. He will be presenting on the role of prayer in strengthening marriage and families. The implications for social policy are considered.

Dr Layaci Anser, a sociologist teaching at Qatar University will be speaking about changing trends in the Middle East.

Ruth Farrugia from the University of Malta will conclude the colloquium by addressing the issue of state responsibility in strengthening families from a legal perspective. She argues that while states are clearly recognised as having an interest in maintaining a family unit that does not impinge on the public purse, other more profound ethical, philosophical and policy considerations may lead to the attribution of justifiable responsibility.

Our Audience

The colloquium will host academics, researchers, family professionals (mainly family therapists, social workers and psychologists) and policymakers as well as top management in child and family services. The audience will consist of around 60 key persons. Over 20% of those present are foreign experts including 11 family scholars of international reputation in the area of family life. Most of these are psychologists, sociologists and policy specialists. We are also inviting the wife of the Prime Minister and the wife of the leader of the Opposition. Both take an active interest in family policy. Both the Archbishop of Malta and the Bishop of Gozo will attend the Colloquium. The Catholic Church in Malta has long taken a keen interest in Maltese family life. Aside from distinguished guests, the 65 members of the House of Representatives of Malta have also been invited to attend.

We plan to publish an edited book on this colloquium. It will be another way of contributing to academic research, interdisciplinary studies and policy initiatives on an international level.

Why have we opted for a colloquium?

We opted for a colloquium rather than a conference because we are also interested in creating dialogue among the various individuals present. We are particularly interested in the views of the eminent scholars who will be presenting at the colloquium. The size of the audience has intentionally been kept small to create opportunities for reactions from the audience. All those attending are committing themselves to attend the colloquium from beginning to end.