

Commentary

THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY. In his encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* last year, Pope John insisted on the enduring validity of the Church's social teaching, rooted as it is in a constant understanding of man's nature and his true needs in society. But the Pope went on to emphasize the need for that teaching 'to be put into effect in the form and manner that different situations allow and demand'. And nothing is more notable in this great social document than its realistic awareness of the true problems that confront men in the world of today. The Church's teaching is seen not as a petrified mass of inherited attitudes; rather is it the inspiration for a courageous response to the needs of our own time. What is essential cannot change: but the application of principles demands a sympathetic knowledge of the real context of things, and the Pope's words are not mere generalizations but vigorous pointers to effective action in every sector of social life.

The family, basic as it is in the structure of human society, inevitably bears the greatest strain in the evolving new world of socialization and rapid change. But it is interesting to see that 'emancipated' attempts to reduce the family's function in the interest of more effective social planning have everywhere been disappointed. A striking if extreme example is the tendency in the kibbutzim of Israel to re-introduce parental rights, which had largely been abandoned in favour of a larger community, free from the restrictions of family loyalties. The family has nowadays become fashionable once more, in the sense that the social scientists (and certainly the social workers) have come to realize that a healthy society can quite simply be computed in terms of a stable and happy family life.

But there is a danger of complacency, in extolling the virtues of the family without recognizing the severe stresses which it must meet in the contemporary world. Catholics, in particular, have a duty to avoid the fallacy of supposing that the family is in no need of support because as such it is sacred. That is why the Catholic Conference called in London last year to discuss the problems of family life had a special importance, since it recognized the imperative need to place the strains of family life in the setting of our society as it is—and not as ideally we might want it to be. The researches of sociologists and the experience of social workers can provide the invaluable information that is necessary before

remedies can be found. In this issue of *BLACKFRIARS* we print some papers from the Conference's proceedings, and it will be agreed that the Church's social mission has everything to gain from the insights arrived at by research and scientific enquiry.

It is important, therefore, that the role of the trained social worker should be seen as essential for the health of many families nowadays. Many of the problems that arise from overcrowding, the increase of leisure, the decay in parental authority and the widespread material assumptions of society at large, are quite beyond the unaided grasp of harassed parents—not to say indifferent parents. The remedies may all ultimately be spiritual ones, but in the meantime there are immediate crises to be met and particular circumstances to accept. It is here that a trained social worker can help, and no vocation commends itself more to the Church's understanding of human happiness. Instead of an attitude of hostility to 'socialization', Catholics should adopt the robust optimism of the present Pope who sees immense opportunities for the Church's traditional work of charity and mercy through the social agencies of the modern state—concerned, as they should be, with the common good, and that is to say with the good of the primary community, the Family.

In his opening address to the Council the Holy Father resolutely set aside the pessimistic prophecies of disaster and expressed the hope that a new breath of the spirit would restore peace and unity to the world. In every area of the Church's mission on earth there are the signs of renewal, and that is why Catholics must work and pray for justice wherever they can further it—and a beginning can be found at hand, in every family, so that its happiness and security may be a microcosm of the larger peace for which we hope.