

# SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

## A CATHOLIC GUIDE TO FAMILY HAPPINESS

The Seventh in a Series on Family Happiness

CHAPTER NINE

### Single-Parent Families

### Can Succeed!

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AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY 1985 (No. 1801a) (Revised 1996)

ONE-PARENT families have been called "the fastest growing family style" in the United States. The situation is similar in many other lands. A record number of divorces, desertions, separations, and illegitimate births have had far-reaching consequences for millions of parents and children.

"I am a 28-year-old widow with two children," wrote one single mother. "I am very depressed for I don't want to raise my children without a father. It seems like no one even cares about me. My children see me cry often and it affects them." Besides wrestling with such feelings as anger, guilt, and loneliness, most single parents face the challenges of both holding a job outside the home and performing domestic duties. One said: "Being a single parent is like being a juggler. After six months of practice, you have finally been able to juggle four balls at once. But just as soon as you are able to do that, somebody throws a new ball to you!"

Youngsters in single-parent families often have their own struggles. They may have to contend with intense emotions in the wake of a parent's abrupt departure or death. For many youths the absence of a parent seems to have a profoundly negative effect.

But . . . SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

Review Question: What has led to the growth in the number of single parent families, and how are those involved affected?

One-parent families existed in Bible times. The Scriptures repeatedly mention “the orphan” (the "fatherless boy") and the "widow."

(Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 24: 19-21; Job 31:16-22)

The Lord God our Father was not indifferent to their plight. The psalmist called God: "He is the father of orphans, and the judge of widows." (Psalm 68:5) [Psalm 67: 6 in the Vulgate]. Surely, God our Father has the same concern for one-parent families today! Indeed, his Word offers principles that can help them to succeed.

(Footnote: Marriages are meant to last “till death do them part.” Divorce, therefore is not how God intended relationships between men and women to end up. Sadly, in today’s world divorce is very common, as the world grossly under-values the Sacrament of Marriage. The Church is fully aware that many marriages have broken down, and permits the estranged couples to separate, but not to re-marry. Much of this chapter will apply to those whose separation has been formalized by a civil divorce.)

Review Question: How do we know that God our Father is concerned about single-parent families?

## **MASTERING THE HOUSEHOLD ROUTINE**

### **FAMILY HAPPINESS**

Consider the task of managing a home. "There are many occasions when you wish you had a man around." admits one woman, deserted by her husband, "like when your car starts making noises and you don't know where they are coming from." Men who are recently divorced or widowed may likewise be bewildered by the multitude of household tasks they must now perform. For children, domestic disarray adds to feelings of instability and insecurity.

Review Question: What problem do single parents have to face initially?

What can help? Note the example set by the “perfect wife,” the "capable wife," the “wise and valiant woman” described at Proverbs 31:10-31. The breadth of her accomplishments is remarkable - buying, selling, sewing, cooking, investing in real estate, farming, and managing a business. Her secret? She was diligent, working late and getting up early to start her activities. And she was well organized, delegating some tasks and using her own hands to care for others. No wonder she won praise!

If you are a single parent, be conscientious about your domestic responsibilities. Find satisfaction in such work, for this does much to add to the happiness of your children. However, proper planning and organization are essential. The Bible says: "The thoughts of the industrious always bring forth abundance: but every sluggard is always in want." (Proverbs 21:5) One single father admitted: "I tend not to think about meals until I'm hungry." But planned meals tend to be more nutritious and appealing than those hastily improvised. You may also have to learn to use your hands in new ways. By consulting knowledgeable friends, ‘how-to’ books, and helpful professionals, some single mothers or fathers have been able to tackle painting, plumbing, and simple auto repairs.

So . . . SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

Review Question:

(a) What fine example was set by the "capable wife" of Proverbs 31?

(b) How does being diligent about domestic responsibilities help in single-parent homes?

Is it fair to ask children to help out? One single mother reasoned: "You want to make up for the absence of the other parent by making it easy for the children." That may be understandable but perhaps not always in the best interests of the child. God-fearing youths of Bible times were assigned appropriate chores.

(As an example consult Genesis 37:2 with Joseph looking after the sheep. Song of Solomon 1:6 tells another story about children punishing one their number, a sister, with hard work in the vineyards – but notice each child had their own vineyard for which each was responsible.)

So, although being careful not to overload your children, you will be wise to assign them tasks such as taking care of the dishes and keeping their room clean. Why not perform some chores together? This can be very enjoyable.

Review Question: How can children of single parents help out in the home?

### **THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING A LIVING**

Most single parents find it difficult to meet their financial needs, and young unwed mothers usually have a particularly hard time.

NOTE: {If a young Christian becomes pregnant because of immoral conduct, the Catholic Church and Christians in our parishes in no way condone what she has done. The Church wants her to repent, of course. So she should avail herself of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, (as should her partner in sin.) Let her be repentant, and the Church, of course, has a duty to offer her help. She, and her new baby, are precious in God's eyes. Should she be unrepentant then she cannot receive Holy Communion, but the priests and all in the Church have a duty to pray intensely for her and to answer all the practical demands of charity.}

In lands where public assistance is available, single parents would be wise to make use of it, at least until they can find employment. The Church, following the Bible's inspired words of Saint Paul, tells us to obey the lawful government which is, in fact ordained of God. We are to pay our taxes. (Romans 13: 1&6) Thus we can legitimately utilize such social security provisions as exist when necessary. Widows and divorcees face similar challenges. Many, forced to reenter the job market after years of homemaking, can often find only low-paying work. Some manage to improve their lot by enrolling in job-training programs or short-term school courses.

Review Question: Why do single mothers often face financial hardships?

### **FAMILY HAPPINESS**

Do not be surprised if your children are unhappy when you seek employment, and do not feel guilty. Rather, explain to them why you must work, and help them to understand that God our Father has given you a duty to provide for them. (In this context see the words of Saint Paul in First Timothy 5:8) In time, most children adjust. However, try to spend as much time with them as your busy schedule allows. Such loving attention can also help to minimize the impact of any financial limitations the family may experience. – Remember the two consoling proverbs found in Proverbs 15:16-17.

Review Question: How can a single mother explain to her children why she must find secular employment?

### **WHO IS TAKING CARE OF WHOM?**

It is natural for single parents to be especially close to their children, yet care must be taken that the God-assigned boundaries between parents and children do not break down. For example, serious difficulties can arise if a single mother expects her son to take on the responsibilities of the man of the house or treats her daughter as a confidant, burdening the girl with intimate problems. Doing so is inappropriate, stressful, and perhaps confusing to a child.

Assure your children that you, as the parent, will care for them-not vice versa. (Compare 2 Corinthians 12:14 where Saint Paul says: "For neither ought the children to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.") At times, you may need some advice or support. Seek it from our priests or other Christian elders or perhaps from mature Christian women, not from your minor children. - Titus 2:3 contains good advice for older women in the parish especially about helping the younger women. Thus . . . SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

Review Question: What boundaries must single parents preserve, and how can they do so?

### ***HANDY HINT***

***Spend as much time as possible with your children***

### **MAINTAINING DISCIPLINE**

A man may have little trouble being taken seriously as a disciplinarian, but a woman may have problems in this regard. Says one single mother: "My sons have men's bodies and men's voices. Sometimes it is hard not to sound indecisive or weak in comparison." Furthermore, you may still be grieving over the death of a beloved mate, or perhaps you may be feeling guilt or anger over a marital breakup. If there is shared custody, you may fear that your child prefers being with your former mate. Such situations can make it difficult to administer balanced discipline.

Review Question: What problem regarding discipline may a single mother face?

### FAMILY HAPPINESS

The Bible says that "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but the child that is left to his own [let on the loose] will bring his mother to shame." (Proverbs 29:15) You have the backing of the Lord God our Father in making and enforcing family rules, so do not give in to guilt, remorse, or fear. (Proverbs 1:8 says: "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and forsake not the law of your mother.") Never compromise Bible principles. (Proverbs 13:24 contains some advice on the spirit in which to apply loving discipline.) Try to be reasonable, consistent, and firm. In time, most children will respond. Still, you will want to take the feelings of your children into consideration. Says one single father: "My discipline had to be tempered with understanding because of the shock of losing their mother. I talk to them at every opportunity. We have 'cozy moments' when we prepare dinner. It is then that they really confide in me."

Review Question: How can single parents maintain a balanced view of discipline?

If you are civilly divorced, nothing good is accomplished by undermining respect for your former mate. Parental bickering is painful for children and will ultimately weaken their respect for both of you. Hence, avoid making hurtful remarks like: "You're just like your father!" Whatever pain your ex-mate may have caused you, he or she is still the parent of your child, who needs the love, attention, and discipline of both parents.

{NOTE: We are not referring to situations in which a child may need to be protected from an abusive parent. Also, if the other parent tries to weaken your authority, perhaps with a view to persuading the children to leave you, it may be well to speak to experienced friends, and others such as the priests or other wise ones in your Parish or the Diocesan headquarters of the Church for advice concerning how to handle the situation. Most dioceses have set up special Family welfare Boards to assist in these awkward situations.}

Review Question:

What should a civilly divorced parent avoid when speaking of the ex-mate?

As discussed in previous chapters in this series of booklets, discipline involves training and instruction, not just punishment. Many problems can be averted by a good program of spiritual training. (See Philippians 3:16) Regular attendance at Mass and other meetings is essential. (Hebrews 10:24-25 says: "Let us consider one another, to provoke unto charity and to good works: Not forsaking our assembly [Church], as some are accustomed; but comforting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.") So is having regular family prayer and, if possible, a weekly family Bible study. True, it is not easy to keep such a study going, nor is it always convenient to have a daily time of family prayer. But persevere! "After a day's work, you really want to relax," says one conscientious mother. "But I prepare myself mentally to study some Scripture, or next Sunday's Mass Readings with my daughter, knowing it is something that needs to be done. Surprise, surprise! She really enjoys our family study!"

With spiritual assistance, SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

Review Question: What spiritual arrangements should be a regular part of discipline in a single-parent home? (Or a two parent home, for that matter?)

The Apostle Paul's companion Timothy was evidently given his training in Bible principles by his mother and his grandmother-but apparently not by his father (who was not of the Jewish faith). Yet, what an outstanding Christian Timothy became! (See Acts 16:1-2; and 2 Timothy 1:5; & 3:14-15)

You can likewise hope for favorable results as you strive to raise your children "in the discipline and correction of the Lord." - Ephesians 6:4.

Review Question: What can we learn from the fine upbringing of Paul's companion Timothy?

### ***HANDY HINT***

***Children, cooperate with your single parent.***

## **WINNING THE BATTLE AGAINST LONELINESS**

### **FAMILY HAPPINESS**

One single parent sighed: "When I come home and see those four walls, and especially after the children are in bed, loneliness really comes over me." Yes, loneliness is often the biggest problem a single parent faces. It is natural to long for the warm companionship and intimacies of marriage. But should a person try to solve this problem at any cost? In the Apostle Paul's day, it was the custom for Christian widows to seriously consider consecrating themselves to Christ, in an early manifestation of what we now call the Religious Life. However Saint Paul advised Saint Timothy not to allow the younger widows to do this as probably their sexual impulses would cause them to break their vow, by which they had engaged themselves to Christ, their 'first faith,' and thus come between them and Christ. His Actual words are: "But the younger widows avoid. For when they have grown wanton in Christ, they will marry: having damnation, because they have made void their first faith." (1 Timothy 5:11-12) So you can see that permitting fleshly desires to overshadow spiritual interests would be damaging. - 1 Timothy 5:6 says: "She (or he) that lives in pleasures, is dead while she is living."

One Catholic Christian gentleman said: "Sexual urges are very strong, but you can control them. When a thought comes into your mind, you must not dwell on it. You have to get rid of it. It also helps to think of your child." God's Word counsels: "Mortify [that is, deaden] therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, lust, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is the service of idols." (Colossians 3:5) So our sexual appetite, (along with our other appetites) must be mortified, deadened or killed. If you were trying to deaden your appetite for food, would you read magazines featuring pictures of delicious foods, or would you associate with people who constantly talked about food? Hardly! The same is true concerning fleshly desires.

Review Questions:

- (a) How can loneliness manifest itself for a single parent?
- (b) What counsel is given to help control fleshly desires?

Some Christians have entered into courtships with unbelievers.

(But 1 Corinthians 7:39 has something important to say about this matter: "A woman is bound by the law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband die, she is at liberty: let her marry to whom she will; **only in the Lord.**" This is one reason why the Catholic Church so actively discourages 'mixed marriages'.)

Did that solve their problem? No. One separated Catholic Christian woman warned: "There is one thing much worse than being single. It is being married to the wrong person!"

### **SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!**

First-century Christian widows no doubt had bouts of loneliness, but the wise ones kept busy. To be enrolled in the special category of the 'consecrated widow' she had to show that she "Had testimony for her good works, if she had brought up children, if she had received to harbour, [that is, had entertained traveling strangers,] if she had 'washed the saints' feet', if she had ministered to them that suffer tribulation, if she had diligently followed every good work." (1 Timothy 5:10) No time for loneliness if you are engaged in these pursuits! Faithful Christians today who have waited many years to find a God-fearing mate have similarly kept busy. A 68-year-old Catholic widow started visiting other widows whenever she got lonely. She said: "I find that by making these visits, keeping up my housework and taking care of my spirituality I don't have time to be lonely." Teaching others about God's Kingdom, His wonderful Catholic Church, is an especially beneficial good work. Consider

joining the Legion of Mary, or other apostolic association of the Catholic Church. - Matthew 28:19-20 contains Christ Our Lord's last commission to His Church. This commission applies to every Catholic. Jesus says: "Going therefore, teach all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."

Review Questions:

- (a) What danger lurks for those who court unbelievers?
- (b) How have single people both in the first century and today battled loneliness?

## FAMILY HAPPINESS

Admittedly, there is no miracle cure for loneliness. But it can be endured with strength from God our Father. Such strength comes when a Christian "persists in supplications and prayers night and day." (1 Timothy 5:5 says: "But she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, let her trust in God, and continue [and persist] in supplications and prayers night and day.) Supplications are earnest pleas, yes, a begging for help, perhaps with strong outcries and tears. (Compare Hebrews 5:7 where Christ is the model of such prayer.) Pouring out your heart to God our Father "night and day" can really help. Further, wholesome association can do much to fill the void of loneliness. Through good association, one can get "the good word" of encouragement described at Proverbs 12:25 which says: "Grief in the heart of a man shall bring him low, but with a good word he shall be made glad."

Review Question: In what way can prayer and good association help overcome loneliness?

If feelings of loneliness surface from time to time-as they likely will - remember that no one has a perfect lot in life. Indeed, "the entire association of your brethren" is suffering in one way or another. (1 Peter 5:9 says: "All of you resist the devil, strong in faith: knowing that the same affliction befalls your brethren who are in the world.") Avoid dwelling on the past. (Ecclesiastes 7:10) Take stock of the advantages that you enjoy. Above all, be determined to keep your integrity and to make God our Father's heart glad. - Proverbs 27:11 has a proverb of Solomon which can be extended to God our Heavenly Father. It runs: "Study wisdom, my son, and make my heart joyful, that you may give an answer to him that reproaches."

Review Question: What considerations will help when feelings of loneliness surface from time to time?

### ***HANDY HINT***

***The Church and the parish is not to ignore the needs of "widows," "orphans" and other "fatherless boys." What help are you offering?***

### **A NOTE ON WHAT YOUNG ONES CAN DO**

Is your mother or father a single parent? If so, what can you do to help? For one thing, be obedient. Neither size nor gender gives a child the license to 'forsake the law of his mother.' (Proverbs 1:8 says: "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and forsake not the law of your mother.") God our Father commands you to be obedient, and in the long run, doing so will work for your happiness. - Look up these two Scriptures for yourselves and see what God expects of you. Proverbs 23:22; & Ephesians 6:1-3.

Take the initiative, and be appreciative. "My mother works in a hospital, and her uniform has to be pressed. So I iron it for her," says Stephen. "It helps my mum, so I do it." One single mother says: "I often find that when I am really low or irritable from a particularly trying day at work and I come home-that is the day my daughter has chosen to set the table and get the supper going."

Keep in mind that your cooperation is important. After a hard day's work, it may be difficult for your parent to prepare for the family Rosary or family prayers. Perhaps your family has wisely decided to deepen your faith by having a regular weekly Bible Study. Well done! Your parent may be having some difficulty in conducting a family Bible study. If you are

uncooperative, you make matters worse. Try to be ready when the scheduled time arrives. Prepare your lessons beforehand. By being obedient, appreciative, and cooperative, you will please your parent, and even more important, you will please God.

## HOW OTHERS CAN HELP

### SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

The support and help of fellow Christians is invaluable. James 1:27 says: "Religion clean and undefiled before our God and Father, is this: to visit the fatherless orphans and widows in their tribulation: and to keep one's self unspotted from this world." Yes, Christians, especially Catholics, are obliged to assist single-parent families. What are some practical ways in which this might be done?

Review Question: What responsibility do fellow Christians have towards single parents in the congregation of our parishes?

Material help can be given. The Bible says: "He that has the substance of this world, and shall see his brother in need, and shall shut up his bowels [his heart] from him: how does the charity [love – *agape*] of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17) The original Greek word for "sees" means, not just a casual glance, but a deliberate gaze. This indicates that a kindly Christian might first become familiar with a family's circumstances and needs. Perhaps they are in need of money. Some may need help with household repairs. Or they might simply appreciate being invited over for a meal or a social gathering.

Review Question: In what ways may needy single parent families be helped?

### FAMILY HAPPINESS

In addition, 1 Peter 3:8 says: "And in fine, all of you are to be all of one mind, having compassion one of another, being lovers of the brotherhood, merciful, modest and humble." Said one single parent with six children: "It's been hard and sometimes I get weighed down. However, once in a while one of the brothers or sisters of the parish will say to me: 'Anne, you're doing a good job. It's going to be worth it.' Just to know that others are thinking of you and that they care is so helpful." Older Christian women may be particularly effective in helping young women who are single parents, offering them a listening ear when they have problems that might be awkward for them to discuss with a man.

Review Question: How may fellow Christians show compassion toward single parents?

Catholic Christian men can help out in other ways.

The righteous man Job said: "I had delivered [and rescued] the poor man that cried out; and the fatherless that had no helper." (Job 29:12) Some Christian men today likewise take a wholesome interest in fatherless children and show genuine "love out of a clean heart," having no ulterior motives. (1 Timothy 1:5 says: "Now the end [purpose] of the commandment is charity [love – *agape*], from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith.) Without neglecting their own families, they might occasionally arrange to work with such young ones in the various ministries and apostolates open to sincere Catholics and might also invite them to share in their own family recreations or prayers or even in their own family Bible study. Such kindness could very well rescue a fatherless child from a wayward course.

Review Question: How can mature Christian men help fatherless children?

### SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES CAN SUCCEED!

Ultimately, of course, single parents have to 'carry their own load' of responsibility. (Galatians 6:5 says: "For every one shall bear his own burden.") Nevertheless, they can have the love of Christian brothers and sisters from the parish and the love of the Lord God our Father Himself. The Bible says of him: "The Lord will support the fatherless and the widow." (Psalm 146:9) [Psalm 145:9 in the Vulgate] With His loving support, single-parent families can succeed!

Review Question: Of what support can single parents be assured?

**HOW CAN THESE BIBLE PRINCIPLES HELP . . .**

**PARENTS AND CHILDREN TO HANDLE THE PROBLEMS OF  
SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES?**

The Lord God our Father is "the father of orphans, and the judge of widows."  
- Psalm 68:5. [Psalm 67:6 in the Vulgate]

Proper planning is essential for success.  
- Proverbs 21:5.

God our Father supports the parent's right to give proper discipline.  
- Proverbs 1:8.

Wise Christian widows keep busy in good works and persist in prayer.  
- 1 Timothy 5:5 & 5:10.

Showing a proper interest in "orphans and widows" is a part of true worship.  
- James 1:27.