

WHERE ARE OUR HUSBANDS & FATHERS?

From a recent talk for the University's Garaventa Center for Catholic life by deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, a scholar of black Catholic life and the University's public safety director. Straightforward man, Harold is.

From the 1600s, when the first black people in America were enslaved by white people, until the mid-1900s, black parents strove to open doors for their children, to create opportunities for them to succeed despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers of racial oppression and poverty. Black families strove to lift a veil of ignorance from a society that held them down, condemned them to slavery, and denied them educational opportunities, thus limiting them to working as unskilled, cheap laborers. Yet, in the face of tremendous adversity, black nuclear families remained *together*; as late as 1960, 78 percent of black families were headed by married couples.

But this number steadily declined during the latter half of the 20th century, and today almost seventy percent of black children are born to single mothers, who are far more likely than married mothers to be undereducated and poor. As marriage and family life declined within the black community, and as many black men have embraced an increasingly hedonistic culture, turning their backs on the responsibility of fatherhood and commitment to life-long relationships, single mothers have increasingly relied on governmental assistance and support, even as the vast majority of higher-income, educated men and women wait to have their children until they are married. So the truth is that we are now a two-family nation, separate and unequal: one thriving and intact, and the other struggling, broken, and far too often African-American.

Urban ghettos fast turned into nuclear-family-free zones. By 1980, 15 years after Daniel Moynihan's famous report *The Negro Family*, the out-of-wedlock birthrate among blacks had more than doubled, to 56 percent. Many experts comforted themselves by pointing out that white mothers were also beginning to forgo marriage, but the truth was that only 9 percent of white births occurred out of wedlock.

And how was that black single-parent family doing? Of black children born between 1967 and 1969, 72 percent received Aid to Families with Dependent Children before the age of 18. And school dropout rates, delinquency, and crime, among the other dysfunctions that Moynihan had warned about, rose; in the years since that report, millions of fatherless babies have been born, and a black underclass has become entrenched. Policy elites have tried to frame the broad cultural problem of separate and unequal families as a simple lack-of-reproductive-services problem; ergo, girls 'at risk' must need sex education and contraceptive services. But the truth was that underclass girls often *wanted* to have babies; they didn't see it as a problem that they were young and unmarried. They did not follow the middle-class life script that read: protracted adolescence, college, first job, marriage, and only then children. They did not share the belief that children needed mature, educated mothers who would make their youngsters' development the center of their lives. So teen pregnancy not only failed to go down, despite all the public attention, the tens of millions of dollars, and hundreds of millions of birth control pills that were thrown its way. *It went up*, peaking in 1990 at 117

pregnancies per 1,000 teenage girls. About 80 percent of those young girls, black and white, were single, and the vast majority were, and remain, poor.

The social scientist Sara McLanahan, with her book *Growing Up with a Single Parent* in 1994, proved that children in single-parent homes were not doing as well as children from two-parent homes on a wide variety of measures, from income to school performance to teen pregnancy. Her research shocked social scientists into re-examining the problem. No one was more attuned to this shift than Bill Clinton, who made the family a centerpiece of his domestic policy. In his 1994 State of the Union Address, he announced: “We cannot renew our country when, within a decade, more than half of our children will be born into families where there is no marriage.” In 1996, he signed a welfare-reform bill (which he had twice vetoed) that included among its goals increasing the number of children living with their two married parents.

But today 70 percent of black children are still born to unmarried mothers, both the National Organization of Women and the National Association of Social Workers continue to see marriage as a “potential source of female oppression,” hip-hop culture glamorizes ghetto life, and the push for gay marriage has led to the idea that children growing up with their own married parents is a form of discrimination. There are some positive signs: welfare reform and tougher child-support regulations have reinforced the message of personal responsibility for one’s children, teen pregnancy has declined since the mid-nineties, and in the ghetto itself many young men are vowing to be the fathers they never had. To really solve the problem, though? Some suggestions: first, answer some serious questions. Where are our husbands and fathers? Why have street gangs replaced families? Why do we tolerate black-on-black violence? Why do black men refer to black women as bitches and whores? How can we rediscover the beauty and truth of our black heritage, and renew our commitment to live our spirituality with boldness, fidelity, and enthusiasm? When will African-Americans stop murdering half a million of their own children a year through abortions? We black people have done a great job fighting poverty and racism, but if continue to kill ourselves, soon we will have eliminated our race, something others could not do in all of American history. And why do we tolerate our own lack of education? Why do we allow half of black men in cities to drop out of high school? And those who do not finish high school will not find work – 75 percent of black male high school dropouts in their 20s are jobless – or incarcerated. Why do we tolerate an entire generation of fathers who have physically, emotionally or spiritually abandoned their wives and children? *Where are our husbands and fathers?*

In 2004, the black actor and comedian Bill Cosby gave a famous speech celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. It caused an uproar, because he was honest in calling black Americans to keep their self-help traditions alive, to fight cultural rot, ignorance, fatherlessness, bad schools, lives wasted in jail. “We cannot blame white people,” he said. “What’s *our* excuse? Are you not paying attention? We’ve got to take the neighborhood back. It’s *our* time now. The people who marched and were hit in the face with rocks and punched in the face so we could get an education – they paved the way. What did we do with it? Let’s start parenting...”

-- Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers