

The changing family

This year, the UN celebrates the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Family. The UN logo, a heart sheltered by a roof linked to another heart, speaks a lot. To me, it means an open space for people to exert their rights and also a metaphor for the changes and the openness that are the hallmarks of the modern family.

Industrialization and urbanization have brought in their wake tumultuous changes in family values and structure. To some, a family is like a refuge providing shelter in times of life's trials and hardships. To others, it is just an "*economic unit*" that provides daily necessities. Still others feel it is like a silk cocoon, warm and comfortable, but closed off and restrictive. The family is also viewed as a chain whose rings are constantly seeking to free themselves in order to be on their own.

Whatever it is, the traditional concept of the family as a permanent haven of unquestioned love and unconditional support is fast eroding. A recent survey shows that 70% of the e-generation are not opposed to pre-marital sex, 60% easily agree on divorce if the union doesn't work and, more importantly, 50% feel that having children is unnecessary. The average household continues to shrink in general. This is surely related to marrying late, not marrying at all, having a single child or not having any. In some Asian countries, with fast growing economies as well as in MED (most economically developed) countries, there is an increase in the "*two-person*" family.

The relationship among family members has undergone changes, as much as the structure of the family itself. The development of close relationships involves a lot of time spent living together and cultivating a patient attitude. These requirements are difficult to meet in families where both parents work, often overtime hours. Lack of time and energy play against the creation of a rich family relationship. Getting married itself has changed from a necessary life experience to a "free" choice.

Studies reveal that, in many places, people first want to live together without being tied by marriage bonds. The divorced woman is not branded "failure" or "bad" anymore. In fact, a divorce is seen as a bold move on the part of a woman to break away from an abusive spouse or family. It has become an opportunity for women to seek a new life and get a second chance.

Thus, the single parent family is becoming a feature of modern societies. With the legalization of homosexual unions, single sex parenthood has entered on the scene. Family values that are promoted by these different models of families are likely to vary widely.

At the bottom line, a family stands for stability, which the child needs in order to grow up as a balanced individual. The absence of the stability factor is the root cause of all adolescent problems like deviant behaviour, truancy, drug abuse, early sexual experience, teenage pregnancy and depression. Can the modern family muster enough solidarity to face these challenges?