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FAMILY THROUGH FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS

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Integration of the Immigrant Family through Family Associations

by the Rev. S. de Lestapis, S.J. (France)

1. As regards the integration of immigrants in the receiving country, there is one basic truth which must never be overlooked: "The only real integration is family integration."

In this whole matter then, we must always try to think of the family rather than of the individual. The individual is an abstraction, admittedly easy to record on administrative sheets or on displaced persons lists. In practice, however, the individual does not exist. Unless he be a foundling, completely unaware of his parentage, raised anonymously and lacking any roots whatsoever, every individual thinks of himself as an integral part of a "We" --- familial or conjugal. Even though he be a refugee, an immigrant or a displaced person, he cannot but think of his own people, he can never ignore their existence. He will always think of himself as either having a family or being subject to the authority of a family.

2. And there is a second basic truth to recall: "There are two types of immigrant, the economic and the political." (1)
The first type emigrate because life has become too difficult in their country of origin, because they cannot find a place for

themselves and they want to settle down elsewhere. The immigrants are looking forward, into the future. But the second type emigrate because they feel that, for one reason or another, they are not wanted in their own countries; they are expelled. And in spite of this enforced exile, these immigrants are looking back towards the past, towards the roots of their families.

3. Thus the family of the "economic" immigrant and that of the "political" immigrant do not find themselves with quite the same outlook. In the first case, that of the worker displaced together with his family, his wife, though she may feel obliged to maintain the traditions and customs of the "old country", will not refuse to make contacts with the people in the new country of residence. However in the other case --- that of the political refugee --- the woman who follows her husband out will be reluctant at first to submit to the process of integration in the receiving country. On the contrary, she will often try to isolate herself by building up a defense against the local ideas and customs. The family of the economic emigrant adopts a long-term point of view, but the political emigrant's family looks upon its situation as provisional.

In view of this contrast, conditions for family integration differ. What may be favorable for one type of emigrant may be not at all applicable to the other type. And in face of some

local event, the reactions of the two types of emigrant may vary widely.

3. Whatever these differences may be, there is still another basic truth upon which everyone agrees: integration is much easier when the immigrants are scattered among the local population than when they are concentrated in one place. (2) When, because of insufficient facilities, the immigrants are more or less crammed into barracks, isolated quarters, empty caserns, etc., a deep gulf is wedged between the immigrants and the local population. Each group behaves without much regard for the other, little interested in its affairs and participating hardly at all in its activities. The end result is that two peoples co-exist, almost without symbiosis; there is no integration. Even the mixing of men at their jobs will not solve the problem, for these men, after all, remain what their families make of them every night, every Sunday, when ^{they} are with them.

4. When the immigrant families are scattered about here and there in the receiving locality, their integration is naturally much faster than if they are living together with one another. There are three occasions which are particularly favorable to this process:

- a) the housewife's shopping trips to local stores, small service exchanges, from door to door or

from floor to floor;

b) the coming and going of children from school to the home and vice-versa; since the little ones are generally accompanied by their mothers, this often gives rise to an exchange of services between neighboring families, each of them taking turns keeping the children of the others;

c) collective recreation organized, in particular, by municipalities or parishes, provided of course the parish is not an air-tight milieu but a wide community of affection and mutual help. In reality, it is around the counters of a bazaar, during an evening of fun, under a Christmas tree or cutting a festive cake, families get to know one another. The best occasion of all perhaps when the organizers of the evening's recreation call upon the immigrants' children to give samples of the dances, songs or games of their native country.

4. Note well the possibilities which family associations or groups of homemakers have for promoting this integration. In contrast even to the most educative of the social service organizations, family associations cultivate reciprocity and mutual

service. They create a community system where each member gives and receives. Look at the following examples of some of the services which these family associations can render: collective laundering, pressing, and mending services; nursery schools, or play schools for toddlers which permit mothers to leave their little ones in safe hands while they do their shopping. In these circumstances the immigrant families, even though still beset by language difficulties, can act with genuine competence, provided the local people show a modicum of confidence in them and appeal to their sense of initiative.

Again, these family associations favor integration by means of the contests which they organize between citizens of the same commune, with honors for the best-kept garden, the most luxuriant orchard, the most attractively decorated home, etc.

Set in this framework of family associations, social service for immigrant families is humanized, so to speak, and is less likely to consist of simple "assistance". The ideal, in this case, is when social assistants from both the country of immigration and that of emigration work together and meet right on the spot, in the homes of the immigrant families.

In the light of all this, one cannot but deplore article 4 of the Ordinance of March 3, 1945 (No. 45,323) in French law, instituting family associations recognized by the departmental

unions and the National Union of Family Associations, but only on condition that these associations are comprised of families "whose head and children are French." The effect of this article is to exclude immigrant families from those associations, which are entitled to name delegates to the UDAF and the UNAF. It is true that private family associations can broaden their statutes so as to admit immigrant families as auxiliary members. Even so, associations which do so are put at a disadvantage: since they no longer fall under the strict terms of the law, they are ineligible to help elect the departmental and national unions. Already, several associations have brought this anomaly to the attention of the UNAF, and have proposed modifying article 4. It would be enough to stipulate that family associations falling under the Ordinance of March 3, 1945 are entitled to open their membership to families whose heads are foreigners, up to a limit of a third of perhaps a half of the total family membership. As concrete recognition for the policy of family integration, this would be more effective than many a more spectacular measure. Besides, these changes are awaited in those parts of the country where immigrants have come to settle on the land --- the North with its Belgians, the South-East and the South-West with their Italians, or, again, the Northern and Eastern mining regions with their Poles. The Gironde region might well serve as a model for family integration by

means of family associations, the population concerned being the product of an internal migration.

In Belgium the League of Large Families has accorded a generous welcome to immigrant families. Too, the League of Catholic Women Workers has set up liaison services between Italian immigrant families and Belgian families.

6. Still other family associations provide an excellent means of integration. We are thinking of parent-teachers' associations, in both state and private schools. The immigrant who watches his child assimilate the customs and manners of the new country at school still has a duty to oversee the progress of his youngster and to try to orient his steps. Since immigrants are not likely to know of orientation services or apprenticeship openings in their new country, they must seek help and advice. (3) Where can they better get it than in the parent-teachers' associations? Taking part in these meetings with other parents will dissipate their inferiority complexes, however justifiable these complexes may seem where technical matters such as schooling are concerned.

7. Finally, the community of faith and religious feeling, participation in a common worship with the same priests --- these cannot help but foster that family integration which we described earlier as the only genuine integration. And here the Catholic

Church is ready, rich in experience and understanding. She knows perfectly well that faith and religious sentiments are the uprooted family's most priceless possessions. The Catholic Church is universal, with one and the same rubric throughout the world. Just the same, a man likes to pray using the prayers of his childhood, he wants to confess his sins and beg God's forgiveness in a language he knows, he prefers to hear the Church's doctrine and its moral teaching in his own native tongue. And the Church knows all this. Hence she takes great pains to facilitate the necessary changes from religious practice according to the tradition of the "old country" to the religious practices of the new homeland.

The Apostolic Constitution "Exsul Familia" of August 1, 1952 confers upon the Sacred Consistorial Congregation a special jurisdiction over immigrants in all countries of the world. This means that the different dioceses must provide for spiritual assistance, to be given by a clergy specially qualified to minister to the different immigrant groups. Nevertheless, it would be going too far to look upon this Constitution as proof of a sort of spiritual resistance to the progressive integration of an immigrant population with an already settled people. Here His Holiness Pope Pius XII has spoken categorically; on August 6, 1952, addressing Italian missionaries and ship chaplains, he advised: "Make it clear to Italian emigrants that your spiritual

aid is an interim measure. You offer them, for example, the possibility of confessing in their native tongue when this is impossible with other local priests.... These immigrants must observe holy days along with the rest of the faithful in their new country. Encourage them to get used to the religious life of the country, and to contact Catholic organizations, especially the workers' and young people's organizations."

These directives are clear and formal. Unfortunately, they sometimes remain a dead letter, through the fault of either one clergy or the other, or thanks to the apathy of laymen in the Catholic Family Action groups who maintain a narrow outlook, never stopping to think of how all these immigrant families would swell the ranks of their devotional and mutual assistance groups, if they were only approached a little more formally.

When one comes right down to it, family integration is largely a matter of charity, of the spiritual feeling for one's neighbor. (4) On First Communion Day, why cannot this or that French or Belgian family invite the neighbors to join in the family's little afternoon celebration? Is it simply a lack of charity, an insensitivity in the face of real though unarticulated needs. And another day, what keeps them from sending one of the children over to the neighbor's house with a piece of cake or a little toy for one of his classmates. Unhappily, the

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answer here is always the same: cold unfriendly feelings, the fear of establishing too close a relationship between the native and immigrant families. "Think of it," they will tell you furtively, "someday they might come wanting your daughter's hand in marriage." Well? If the efforts to integrate these people have been marked by charity, understanding and tact and if, above all, the young people share the same religious convictions, what is the great evil in marriage?

It is all a question of education: "The immigrant priest must have enough wisdom and supernatural sense to know that those who are entrusted to his care will be saved not by their loyalty to national traditions, but by their loyalty to Christ." (5) And conversely, "The native priest in the welcoming country must have enough wisdom and Catholic-mindedness to know that the members of his own flock will not be saved if they do not open up their hearts and homes to this new uprooted "neighbor", the immigrant, whose situation is so reminiscent of that of the man found by the Good Samaritan."

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- (1) There exists a third category, which we leave out of account here, because it is very small and specialized: ambassadorial and consular functionaries, commercial attachés, etc.
- (2) Within limits, a similar situation exists with reference to the "national parishes" which, by keeping the immigrants huddled together, tend to slow up their integration.
- (3) We can hardly overemphasize the necessity for seeing to it that the adults assimilate the mores of their new homeland along with the children. Otherwise immigrant families are exposed to the grave danger of a break between the generations. There are cases where family prayer has had to stop, because the children were reciting their prayers in the language of the new country and their parents were unable to do so.
- (4) We have given only a hasty sketch of this duty of charity towards the newcomers. It is clear however that, upon closer examination of the situation, integration problems must be distinguished; the problems of a small community are not those of a great city.
- (5) R.P. de Rochcau. Migrations C.I.C.M. No. 21