

Last week in his Lenten message, the Bishop of Limerick, Dr Jeremiah Newman, warned about an extremist movement for women's liberation that could injure the family. Anne Dempsey got some reaction

Feminism and the family

IS feminism fatal for families? In his recent Lenten message, the Bishop of Limerick, Dr Jeremiah Newman, suggests it is: "We have seen introduced an extremist movement for women's liberation that also can injure the family" he said, adding: "The received model is of people essentially on their own, finding their identities not in close association but in the impersonal world of self-fulfilment. And the end result is an outcome that some have proclaimed to be the death of the family."

Is he right? Is the goal of self awareness inimical to parenting? And if the family is in difficulty, is feminism to blame? What price patriarchy — or even poverty — in the erosion of family values?

Anne Taylor chairwoman of the Council for the Status of Women, representing 30,000 Irishwomen, is also the 45-year-old wife of Bill, and mother of six children aged 10 to 24. With her husband, she runs a book and coffee shop in Clonmel, Co Tipperary.

"Does feminism damage families? I will answer for myself. I discovered feminism in my early thirties. I began coming together with other women to talk about health, education, work, training, violence and opportunity. It was a crucial time for me and I saw lights popping on all over the place. I made a decision to do something, helped to open a Rape Crisis Centre in Clonmel, and I haven't stopped learning since."

"I began coming home with this new stuff to my husband and family, particularly to my two eldest sons then teenagers. They didn't want to hear. There were long discussions round the dinner table, there were huge stand up arguments. I remember the night that I heard Mary Daly say that all men are rapists, a very wrong statement. We explored that in depth in our family. And

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myself now, I'm going to go, I've not a lot to go with, but I'm going anyway to find something for myself at last'. Many people are in loveless or incompatible unions, or they come to the realisation that they can't live with a situation any more. Ending a marriage is not easy, it can take great courage, those that infer that people do it easily or thoughtlessly are wrong. And marital breakdown harms children. Nobody is denying that. You won't get a woman to deny it. It is an awful dilemma. Separated women live with that legacy.

Some of them make it worse by using children as pawns to pay back the father, or denying him access. But we have a chance in this State to learn from the adversarial system in the UK — to learn what not to do — because my gut feeling around this is that it is not so much the separation that damages children, but the manner of it."

As for the influences normally identified as being anti-family, Anne Taylor wonders also about the — perhaps unknowing — enemy within: "With regard to the family, I think it's the attitude of some voices within the Catholic church which undermines it more than any feminists. The suggestion that there is only one model of family puts up the barricades, shuts people out, gives the message that if there is any difference at all, you don't fit in. This attitude is losing the church so many people. Also, in this International Year of the Family, the UN's definition of family is any two people — father and child, spouses, mother and daughter."

"Again, in my own extended family, there is break up, children born out of wedlock, family problems. But within it are viable families, where children are cared for, where parents and grandparents offer support. There is a strength of values being passed on in these families — like good example, justice, kindness, courtesy. There is a support, a recognition and an acknowledgement of the way it is."

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feminists who drive men into corners, suggest we can do without men, and categorise them all as violent brutes."

"I know women have suffered violence from men, but we need new responses to that. Boys today are much less sure of themselves. We've taken away their sense of supremacy and rightly so, but we haven't replaced it with anything that is growthful for them. So they're stuck and confused."

Through her work in schools, she finds many children experience parents as uninterested, unavailable or emotionally detached. She agrees that large family systems in the past may also have been emotionally deficient, and not the Walton-type affairs glorified in American rural soaps: "That was very often the case, but we have not made progress. We have merely exchanged one bad way for another. At least in the past children had a role, they felt needed, even if it was only to fetch a bucket of water."

"Today I believe family life is suffering from an obsessive individualism which is the prevailing malaise. Children are left without the feeling of

being supported. Children come to me and say 'we have a minder. I'd never talk to her'. To whom do the children talk? Whom can they cry with?" She reads from a letter in front of her: "Mam and Dad are arguing all the time, I don't know what to do, and I have a pain in my chest"

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How has this situation come about? What happens to our childhood hurts which allows us grow up and create hurt ourselves? Why this awful parental amnesia? "It happens because as adults we don't recognise where our own pain originates," says Angela. "We knew what it was like to be hurt because our father didn't show approval, say, but we forget." And so patterns are re-enacted. When our child exhibits feelings we may have felt as children, it can trigger fear and anger in us, and instead of responding with love and openness, we can lash out in irritation or dismissal.

She believes parents who put their children into creches all day every day may be abdicating their responsibility.

If, she says, they upgraded their children's needs when making life plans, rather than regarding children as afterthoughts who will fit in, maybe some could make different choices. She feels that many more models of part-time work should be available. There should be the option of job-sharing, and some financial incentive for full-time mothers. "The Government should be much more creative in supporting families. The attitude if a marriage is in difficulty, let it go, is too superficial and not what is best for the State."

WHAT would she do if she were Minister for Families? "It's the chicken and egg situation; where do you start? At one end, I would devise relationship programmes in schools in association with people who listen to children. Boys need a lot of help to find new ways of being male. I would find ways to show the value of discipline and commitment. I would offer realistic marriage preparation courses, and at the other end, I would provide counselling and mediation for families in diffi-



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Angela McNamara: 'Family life is being seriously put down by militant feminists.'



June Levine: 'Did the abolition of slavery damage the slave owners?'

ty. Our research shocked us. The system then was founded on the belief that a woman is economically dependent on a man and when this fell down, as in the case of deserted wives, unmarried mothers and widows, many women were destitute. This was the institutionalised set up."

She is not surprised that changes in an existing power structure have their detractors. Blaming the victims she says is not new: "Whenever an oppressed minority gains its rights there is a backlash. If the minority were another racial group — if they were black people or Jews — people would have to be more careful in their language. But because it's women, they feel they can be more overt. Familiarity breeds contempt, and women are the only colonised group who continue to sleep with the enemy."

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husband, she runs a book and coffee shop in Clonmel, Co Tipperary. "Does feminism damage families? I will answer for myself. I discovered feminism in my early thirties. I began coming together with other women to talk about health, education, work, training, violence and opportunity. It was a crucial time for me and I saw lights popping on all over the place. I made a decision to do something, helped to open a Rape Crisis Centre in Clonmel, and I haven't stopped learning since.

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the result of all the discussion is that my husband and my children are aware of many issues, are more open. I am a feminist. I live in a world with men, and feminism has offered my family something of value."

But there can be a link between personal development — a tenet of feminism — and marital separation. At a recent seminar, where woman after woman took the microphone and announced that they were simultaneously lone parents and born-again Amazons, someone stood up and asked which came first — the assertiveness course or the end of the marriage? It emerged that, in some cases, women in the debris of his departure had been helped to new self-esteem through personal development. In others, a personal development course had confirmed that their marriage was untenable, and had given them the courage to go when there seemed no possibility of redemption. Many called their development the price of change.

Anne Taylor accepts that feminism contributes to marital separation. "Seventy five per cent of marital breakdown is initiated by women — but this is saying as much about men as it does about women. Women today are not going to accept from men what they did in the past. I was talking to a 55-year-old woman recently who is finally leaving a bad marriage. She said 'I've only

wonders also about the — perhaps unknowing — enemy within: "With regard to the family, I think it's the attitude of some voices within the Catholic church which undermines it more than any feminists. The suggestion that there is only one model of family puts up the barricades, shuts people out, gives the message that if there is any difference at all, you don't fit in. This attitude is losing the church so many people. Also, in this International Year of the Family, the UN's definition of family is any two people — father and child, spouses, mother and daughter.

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"The Council for the Status of Women have approached the bishops on several occasions and said how about sitting down and talking to each other? So far we have had no response. The public dialogue would seem to put us at opposing ends, but in the middle there is actual reality.

The CSW has recently called for the establishment of a Commission on the Family — an umbrella body which would create, expand and draw under it, family support services such as marriage counselling, reconciliation, arbitration, mediation, family tribunals. The commission would span a number of Government departments, would initiate research, and generally promote policies and strategies to support families. "The family is the smallest unit of democracy," says Anne Taylor. "In a democracy, there are mutual rights, and people are listened to. Ideally, what is good for women will be good for families, what is good for children will be good for men, what is good for men will be good for women. I do not see the rights of women, men, children or families as mutually exclusive, but all part of the whole."

ANGELA McNamara, youth counsellor, has been working with families for 30 years. Her grown up family ranges in age from 40 to 34. "I would go a long way with what the bishop says, and I find it sad that the main response from the Government to mark the Year of the Family is the plan to introduce divorce.

"I think the issues are much more subtle, and we need to look more closely at what is happening between men and women. I believe family life is being seriously put down by militant

feminists who drive men into corners, suggest we can do without men, and categorise them all as violent brutes.

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Through her work in schools, she finds many children experience parents as uninterested, unavailable or emotionally detached. She agrees that large family systems in the past may also have been emotionally deficient, and not the Walton-type affairs glorified in American rural soaps: "That was very often the case, but we have not made progress. We have merely exchanged one bad way for another. At least in the past children had a role, they felt needed, even if it was only to fetch a bucket of water.

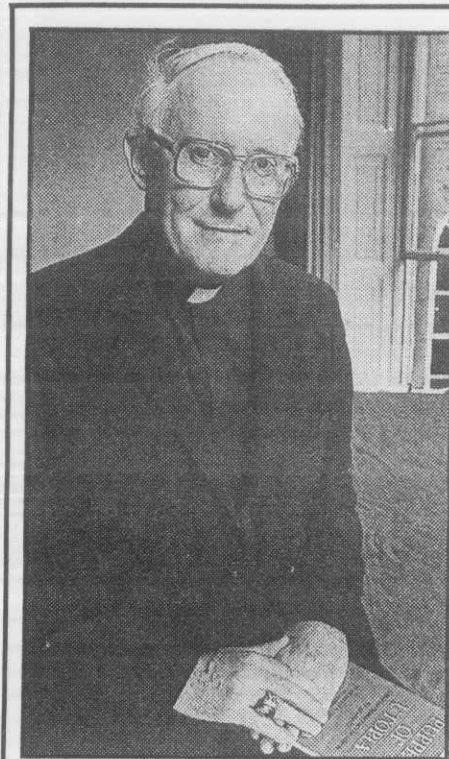
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Dr Jeremiah Newman, Bishop of Limerick

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"I do not refer to a balanced and welcome promotion of women's equality, but the promotion of an exaggerated view of the self-sufficiency of wives which, although generally unnoticed, can tempt husbands to adopt a similar attitude."

— Bishop Newman in his Lenten message

If, she says, they upgraded their children's needs when making life plans, rather than regarding children as afterthoughts who will fit in, maybe some could make different choices. She feels that many more models of part-time work should be available. There should be the option of job-sharing, and some financial incentive for full-time mothers. "The Government should be much more creative in supporting families. The attitude if a marriage is in difficulty, let it go, is too superficial and not what is best for the State."

WHAT would she do if she were Minister for Families? "It's the chicken and egg situation; where do you start? At one end, I would devise relationship programmes in schools in association with people who listen to children. Boys need a lot of help to find new ways of being male. I would find ways to show the value of discipline and commitment. I would offer realistic marriage preparation courses, and at the other end, I would provide counselling and mediation for families in difficulty. At the moment parenting is not looked on as an important value.

"When upset children come to me now, I tell them to distance themselves from the row and not to walk in trying to sort things out between their parents. I tell them that, perhaps, it's not as bad as they think — maybe parents are letting off steam. And I tell them to choose a time when things are good to tell the parents how they feel. Say 'when you fight, I'm really frightened'."

Finally, some mature recollections. Writer and feminist June Levine was a founder-member of the Irishwomen's Liberation Movement over 25 years ago. Today she is mother and grandmother with a grown up family aged 40 to 36. She is still full of fire: "Has feminism damaged families?" she asks. "Did the abolition of slavery damage the slave owners? It certainly took them some time to get used to it."

"In my experience, feminism made women better mothers because when people develop their self-esteem, the spin-off is that they see their children's needs also. Many of them were almost too good, and couldn't do enough. Looking around now at the grown up children of these early women, they all seem to be competent, caring people.

"Feminism was founded on a belief that women are people in their own right, not derivations of men. When we set out, we wanted equal rights for women, equal job opportunities, equal pay, an allowance for women in dis-

tress. Our research shocked us. The system then was founded on the belief that a woman is economically dependent on a man and when this fell down, as in the case of deserted wives, unmarried mothers and widows, many women were destitute. This was the institutionalised set up."

She is not surprised that changes in an existing power structure have their detractors. Blaming the victims she says is not new: "Whenever an oppressed minority gains its rights there is a backlash. If the minority were another racial group — if they were black people or Jews — people would have to be more careful in their language. But because it's women, they feel they can be more overt. Familiarity breeds contempt, and women are the only colonised group who continue to sleep with the enemy."

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But how helpful is it to family life to still see man as the enemy? Many men feel threatened and emasculated by feminism. "I don't give a damn," says June Levine, "I've had it up to here with how men feel. If they need to reinvent themselves, let them get on with it. Any woman in the world with a fellow will be only too delighted if he wants to open out more. It's easy now. There are development courses, self-help groups, but it's women that are flocking to them. Men won't go. They prefer to whinge and moan in pubs, bending the elbow, and asking what do these women want?"

And what of children caught in the war zone? "A happy home must be the most ideal thing a child can have," she says. "A home where Daddy and Mammy love each other, and each is happy within themselves. But where this is not happening, where two people are hopping off each other, can't stand each other, what is the point of staying together?"

"Of course marital break up harms children, but why blame women solely for failed marriages? Women have traditionally carried the responsibility for the family, so when it breaks down, women feel guilt. Society expects women to dance and dance and to please men. We are now blaming women because they fail to please, and it won't do."