

Single Motherhood: Conquering the Odds with Love

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(May 7, 2008) A young single mother and her daughter are seated in the front row of the theater, watching a tragic scene unfold on the screen above. In the movie, a little girl, the only child of a single mother, is struck by a car and killed. Instinctively, the young mother and her child grip one another and huddle close in their seats. No words are necessary. Their body language says it all - "Don't let this happen to us!"

This true story of a single, freelance photographer and her nine year-old daughter is just one example of the tender and uniquely symbiotic love shared by single moms and their children in 10.4 million American households today.

The latest U.S. Census Bureau figures reveal that an estimated 22 million children go home every day to one parent, 83 percent of whom are women. Since the advent of the sexual revolution in 1960 to 1995, the proportion of children living in single-parent homes tripled, from nine to 27 percent.

Behind these numbers lurks the sobering reality of lives riddled with constant economic, social and inter-personal struggle. Nearly thirty percent of single mothers are living below the poverty line. Only adding to this injustice is the appalling number of unpaid child support claims. The caseload at the Federal Office for Child Support Enforcement in 2005 was a staggering 15.2 million.

Family crisis is yet another frequent visitor to the homes of these delicate families. A growing body of research finds that children who live absent from their biological fathers are at least two to three times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents.

It's not hard to imagine the cultural problems that would be minimized just by increasing the number of two-parent homes in our nation. One study found that if the U.S. family was as strong today as it was in 1970, it would mean a half million fewer children who would fail a grade at school and/or be involved in violence. Seventy thousand fewer children would attempt suicide. Crime rates and illegal drug use would decrease along with the number of future broken families.

But not all the facts are so dire. After all, single motherhood is not exactly a new phenomenon. For whatever reason this condition befalls a woman, history has shown that she is able to do far more than simply cope. Many women have used this state in life as a springboard to sainthood.

Consider the Blessed Mother. At different times in her life she was both an unwed pregnant teen and, after St. Joseph died, a single mother.

St. Helena, the mother of Constantine, lost her husband after 22 years when he divorced her for a younger woman.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was only 28 when her husband died and left her to raise five young children alone.

St. Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297) was just 14 when she became the mistress of a nobleman who made it clear he would never marry her. Undeterred, she lived with him for nine years and bore him a son. It was only after his brutal murder that she began to question the way she was living, a process that led to her conversion and entrance into a Franciscan convent.

Things haven't changed much over time. Thankfully, neither has the bottom line.

Love still conquers all.

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