NEWSLETTER

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EDITORIAL

Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, speaks directly to one of the great questions of our time: how can we remain truly human in the age of artificial intelligence? The Pope welcomes the possibilities offered by new technologies, but he insists that they must serve the human person, the common good and the family. His warning is especially relevant for us. Technology must not

be judged only by efficiency, profit or convenience. It must be judged by whether it helps human beings to flourish. This is why the encyclical gives such attention to work, young people and family life.

Sections 165-169 of *Magnifica Humanitas* are dedicated to the family. Pope Leo writes that "the family is a primary social good" but also a "fragile social good". It needs cultural, legal and economic support. "When political projects and major economic decisions relegate the family to a marginal or secondary role, the authentic growth of the entire social body is compromised", Pope Leo says.

There is also a deeper issue. Technology must not be allowed to replace real human relationships. Families are formed through presence, patience, sacrifice, conversation and love. No machine can substitute for a mother or father. No algorithm can replace the education of the heart that takes place in the home. AI may assist human beings, but it must never redefine them.

Family Solidarity will return to these questions in a forthcoming webinar on AI and the family. Parents, educators and young people need guidance, not panic; discernment, not blind enthusiasm.

We are also planning a webinar on Saint Francis in October, during the Franciscan Year, which marks the 800th anniversary of his death. The connection is not accidental. In an age of powerful machines and constant noise, Saint Francis reminds us of simplicity, humility, peace and dependence on God.

The more artificial our world becomes, the more we need real families, real communities and real love. Pope Leo's encyclical is therefore both a warning and an invitation: to ensure that technology remains at the service of the human person, and that the family remains at the heart of society.

Angelo Bottone

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WHY BOYS NEED FATHERS



Boys today are caught in a downward spiral, according to a new report by the UK Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). They are spending more time on screens, less time with other people, and less time outdoors. Many feel lonely, cut off and unsure of themselves. They are also doing less well at school and are less likely to flourish later in life. Behind many of the statistics now emerging lies a simple and uncomfortable truth: too many boys are growing up without the guidance of a father or another stable male role model.

The CSJ's recent report, *Lost Boys: Mentors and Role Models*, paints a troubling picture of the state of many boys' lives in Britain. It notes that the happiness of children has fallen sharply in recent years. In 2010–2012, 36pc of boys aged 10 to 15 said they were completely happy with life, compared with 33pc of girls. Today, those figures have fallen to 27pc and 18pc respectively.

The report is based in part on consultations with dozens of charities working directly with boys and young men. Those charities described boys who are increasingly isolated, disconnected and lacking in direction. They also stressed that many are growing up without strong male role models. According to the report, 2.5 million children in Britain now live in a home without a father.

This is where family structure enters the picture. Too often, it is treated as an awkward subject, something best avoided. But it is impossible to understand the problems facing many boys without looking at the weakening of family life. Stable families do not guarantee success, and family breakdown does not doom a child to failure. But family structure plainly matters. Children generally do best when they grow up in secure, committed homes, and boys in particular often seem to suffer when that stability is missing.

This point is reinforced by another CSJ study, which found that just two in ten poor white children live with married parents, compared with almost six in ten poor children from ethnic minority backgrounds. That is a striking gap. Stable family life does not solve every problem, but it gives children a far stronger foundation. Where fathers are present, involved and committed, boys are much more likely to thrive.

The charities consulted by the CSJ repeatedly identified fathers as the most likely and most influential role model for boys. This is not to diminish the remarkable work done by mothers, including the many who raise sons alone with great devotion. But fathers often offer something distinctive: a model of male identity, and an example of how to channel strength, anger, responsibility and emotional struggle in constructive ways.

This matters because boys are looking for an example of what kind of man they should become. Fathers help shape that picture. They are central to a boy's sense of identity. A loving and steady father-son relationship can help a boy grow in confidence, emotional balance and self-discipline. Research cited in the report suggests that boys with positive relationships with their fathers are more likely to do better in education, work and relationships later in life. The reverse is also true. When fathers are absent, boys are more likely to struggle. Studies have found worse outcomes in education, employment, mental health and family life for boys who grow up without their fathers.

There are echoes of this problem in Ireland as well. The *Watch Them Grow* report on children's experiences of parental separation shows how difficult family breakdown can be for children and how important it is that both parents remain meaningfully involved in their lives

wherever possible. We may not discuss this issue enough, but that does not make it any less real.

If we are serious about helping boys, we cannot focus only on schools, screens or mental health services, important though these are. We also need to speak again about fathers, commitment and family stability. Boys need love, discipline, encouragement and example. Above all, they need men in their lives who are present, dependable and willing to show them how to become good men.

ONE IN FOUR GEN ZERS WILL NEVER HAVE CHILDREN, A NEW IONA INSTITUTE STUDY FORECASTS



One in four members of 'Gen Z' look set never to have children, a new paper from the Iona Institute forecasts. The paper is called '*Choice or Circumstance? Rising Childlessness in Ireland*'.

The document examines trends in childlessness by generation starting with women born in 1955 (the 'baby boomers'). It finds that only 13.5pc of this group were still childless at age 45. But this looks set to rise to around 24pc among women born in the late 1990s, based on current trends.

A huge question is whether this will be by choice or circumstance? That is, how much childlessness will have been planned, and how much will be unplanned and forced upon them by circumstance, such as the cost of living? An Amarach Research poll commissioned by the Iona Institute in 2022, showed that 85pc of people want to have at least two children and only 2pc expressed a wish for no children. The results did not vary significantly by age. We also see a big rise in the number of people availing of infertility treatments, which indicates that a lot of childlessness is unplanned.

The report charts a huge increase in the number of women still childless by age 30. Among those born in the late 1950s, only 30.9pc were childless at age 30. Among those born in the early 1990s, the number had increased to 63.6pc. The longer a person delays having children, the more likely it is they will never have any.

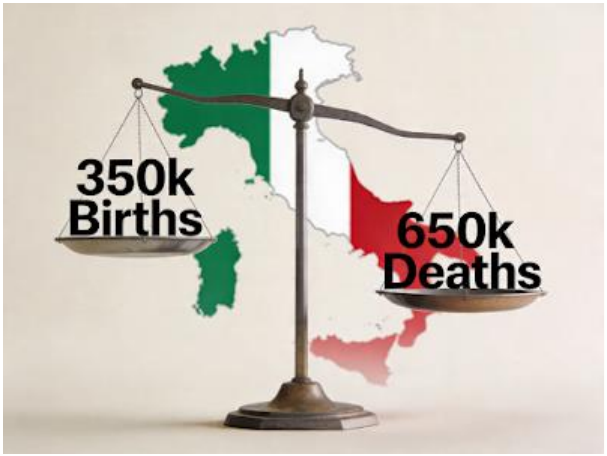
According to CSO data, the average man is now almost 38 getting married and the average woman is almost 36, and even though many children are now born outside marriage, fertility rates and marriage rates tend to go up and down together.

Commenting on the report, Breda O'Brien, a spokesperson for The Iona Institute said: "Once upon a time, we used to worry about people having more children than they planned, but now we need to start worrying much more about them having fewer than they wish for, and in many cases, having none at all, and consider the amount of pain and distress this will cause". She continued: "A situation in which people are having fewer children than they planned for, and in a growing number of cases will end up childless, is a personal tragedy, but also has very significant social and economic consequences because of the effects of an ageing population and growing loneliness".

She added: "As a society, we need to debate why this is happening. Is it purely a result of the high cost of living, or it is also because young people are today often encouraged to put off starting a family until they are well into their 30s, by which time it might be too late? One way or the other, it is a phenomenon we should discuss

far more widely if our aim is to help people to achieve their eventual life goals".

LESSONS FROM ITALY'S CATASTROPHIC DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE



Last year, Italy recorded just 355,000 births in a population of about 59 million. That corresponds to a fertility rate of 1.14 children per woman of childbearing age, one of the lowest in Europe and indeed in the world. Around 650,000 Italians are now dying each year. You can see the direction of travel. It is catastrophic.

Italy, unfortunately, has a long history of below-replacement-level birth rates. Economic factors certainly matter, but a recent television programme suggested that the crisis goes deeper. Among the guests, the president of the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE), Vincenzo Bassi, offered a compelling diagnosis: it is also about loneliness, trust, culture and the way society imagines the future.

The programme began with interviews with Italian university students. Some said they would like children, but only after their thirties. Others were unsure they would ever be able to afford a family. One young woman described lifelong commitment as an "encumbrance"; another said having children had become "almost a luxury." Several spoke of uncertainty, not only about their own prospects, but about the state of the world itself.
Vincenzo Bassi did not deny the economic pressures, but he argued that the central problem is more existential and social. "The real problem is loneliness," he said. A society may offer tax breaks and incentives, but if men and women feel isolated, unsupported and mistrustful, policies alone will struggle to reverse the decline.

Bassi also insisted that demography must be seen as part of any serious discussion of sustainable development. "Sustainable development is not possible without intergenerational balance," he said. Children should not be viewed as a burden on public finances, but as part of a society's human capital and future stability.

His remarks also carried a cultural and communal dimension. Too often, demographic decline is treated as something relevant only to families. Bassi reminds us that it affects everyone. A society without children is not simply poorer in numbers; it is weaker in continuity,

solidarity and hope. He suggested that birth rates might look different if they were measured not just across territories, but within real communities where people feel less alone. Later, reflecting on examples from Trentino-Alto Adige, the region in the North-East of Italy which has the highest fertility rate, Bassi highlighted their family-friendly environments. "Families, when they are in a network, are more stable and more generative", he claimed.

After Bassi, the programme turned to the medical dimension of delayed parenthood with gynaecologist Maurizio Guida. His intervention was brief but blunt. Social expectations may have changed, he said, but biology has not. "The social change does not coincide with a change in human physiology." Many young adults now imagine their thirties as the natural time to begin thinking about children. Yet Guida warned that female fertility declines sharply after 35 and falls further after 42 or 43. Taken together, Bassi and Guida offered a powerful diagnosis. Italy’s birth crisis is not only about the economy. It is about loneliness, weak communities, cultural uncertainty, and a society that often ignores the conditions in which family life can flourish. Unless those deeper realities are faced, the country will continue to drift into demographic decline.

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT VOTES AGAINST 'ASSISTING DYING'



On 17th March, a Bill to legalise assisted dying in Scotland was rejected at its final parliamentary stage by 69 votes to 57, with one abstention and two members not voting. Twelve MSPs changed their position since the first vote in May last year, many of them influenced by evidence from palliative care specialists, who argued that good end-of-life care reduces the demand for assisted dying.

In its final form, the Bill limited assisted dying to mentally competent adults resident in Scotland with a terminal illness, who made a voluntary and informed request free from coercion, verified by at least two doctors. The person would have had to administer the life-ending medication themselves; direct euthanasia, involving a doctor administering the substance, was not permitted.
Over time, the debate shifted from the abstract question—"should this be considered?"—to a more practical one: "is this workable and safe enough to

enact?" Some MSPs who supported the principle were ultimately not convinced that the proposed safeguards were sufficiently robust or effective.

A recurring concern was not only the risk of explicit coercion, but the more subtle possibility that individuals might feel pressure because they are ill, dependent, costly to care for, or perceive themselves as a burden. The committee's Stage 1 report had already highlighted safeguards as an area requiring strengthening, and warned that eligibility criteria might, over time, be challenged and widened.

Concerns were also raised about the protection and role clarity of healthcare professionals. The British Geriatrics Society, for example, wrote to MSPs ahead of the final vote, stating that the Bill did not contain adequate safeguards to protect older people and failed to sufficiently protect healthcare professionals who do not wish to participate. Those MSPs who changed their position came from across the political spectrum (five Conservatives, four SNP, and three Labour), underlining that this was not a party-political issue.

The Scottish National Party did not impose a party whip, treating the vote as a matter of conscience. In the final division, SNP MSPs voted 37 in favour and 22 against,

while the Health Secretary, Neil Gray, abstained. The SNP leader and First Minister, John Swinney, voted against the Bill. He stated: "I am concerned that it will fundamentally change the relationship between patients and doctors in a detrimental way. I am concerned that vulnerable individuals in our society, who may feel that they are a burden to their loved ones or to society, may opt to end their life prematurely. And lastly, I am concerned that the legislation will not protect us from the scope of this legislation being extended, and I think that would be regrettable."

His predecessor, Humza Yousaf, had also opposed assisted dying during his time as First Minister. Likewise, former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon expressed similar concerns, warning that what is presented as a "right to die" could, for some, become "a duty to die". "The issue that most concerns me is a situation where somebody, even if it is a small number of people, feels an internal pressure to exercise a right to die. It becomes not a right to die, but a duty to die", she said to Sky News.

This outcome in Scotland comes at a time when similar proposals in England and Wales have also struggled to secure parliamentary approval, encountering significant resistance, particularly in the British House of Lords. In a society as secular and multicultural as the United

Kingdom, such decisions suggest that concerns about safeguarding the vulnerable and preserving the integrity of medical care continue to carry weight across political and cultural divides. There is reason to hope that Irish policymakers, too, will approach the issue with similar prudence, resisting pressure from lobby groups and upholding a commitment to the protection of human life and dignity.

THE STRANGE RISE OF 'SPIRITUAL' WEDDINGS IN IRELAND



Two years ago, in issue 103 of this newsletter, we noted that a growing number of wedding ceremonies were being performed by groups that, in many cases, have no congregations in the ordinary sense, no parish life, and little resemblance to what most people would understand by a religion. In April, for the first time the CSO has made public more detailed figures about wedding in Ireland in recent years.

One of the most surprising discoveries was the scale of the Spiritualist Union of Ireland. In 2024, it performed 1,374 opposite-sex marriage ceremonies. For comparison, that is more than seven times the number of Church of Ireland ceremonies, which stood at 193.

But what is the Spiritualist Union of Ireland? The organisation was set up by Tom Colton, a self-described spiritual medium. Colton has a serious criminal history. The Irish Times reported that he was disqualified from acting as a company director following a 2014 conviction for the theft of €322,000 from an elderly couple while acting as their accountant, with the trial judge describing his conduct as "extraordinarily dishonest and fraudulent". That conviction triggered an automatic disqualification from acting as a company director.

However, according to the Irish Times, Tom Colton later pleaded guilty to breaching that disqualification by acting as a director of Grá Agus Solas ULC, a company providing celebrant services for weddings, funerals and baby naming ceremonies, while disqualified. He received a nine-month suspended sentence and consented to a ten-year directorship disqualification.

Grá Agus Solas, trading as Spiritual Ceremonies, is not the same legal entity as the Spiritualist Union of Ireland. The Spiritualist Union is a separate company and solemnising body. However, the two are closely linked in practice: Grá Agus Solas/Spiritual Ceremonies operates as a ceremony-services platform, its celebrants include officiants of the Spiritualist Union of Ireland, and company records place Grá Agus Solas at the Spiritualist Union's address. Despite Colton's convictions, Spiritualist ceremonies continue to form a major part of Ireland's marriage landscape, but they are only one part of a much broader and rapidly expanding ecosystem of pseudo-religious ceremony providers.

Over the past few years, a wide range of organisations offering what might loosely be called 'alternative spiritual' ceremonies has emerged. These groups present themselves as religious or spiritual bodies but in most cases they do not resemble traditional religions in any meaningful sense. Among the most prominent are organisations such as Entheos and OneSpirit Ireland, which together officiate at a large and growing number of weddings each year. OneSpirit Ireland says its interfaith ministers have been active in Ireland since 2008 and that they offer 'unique and bespoke legal weddings', funerals, naming ceremonies and spiritual counselling. It also states plainly: 'We Have No Church.'

What is typically being offered is not membership in a religious community, but a service: a personalised ceremony, tailored to the couple's preferences, and frequently designed to fit smoothly into the wedding venue and reception.

Some organisations go further still. Entheos Ireland, for instance, offers not only weddings and funerals, but also ceremonies linked to abortion. This illustrates how far the category of 'religious' or 'spiritual' ceremony has expanded in practice. Individuals associated with this broader sector are also involved in wider political causes. Karen Dempsey, the founder of Entheos Ireland, was involved in the Repeal the 8th campaign. In 2017, she was one of about 25 women dressed as red handmaids, inspired by 'The Handmaid's Tale', who marched to the Dáil in an event hosted by ROSA.

Another celebrant in this wider world is Janie Lazar, the founder and chair of End of Life Ireland, a group campaigning for euthanasia and assisted suicide. The Temple of Plants is an especially bizarre example. Its rites now appear in the CSO marriage data. The organisation describes itself as 'non-religious, multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-dimensional', while also speaking of honouring 'the Goddess, our Divine Cosmic Mother'. It

says: ‘We are united in our love for the Earth and all Her realms. Plants are central to our work and seen as an expression of the Divine Feminine.’

Such language gives a sense of the highly eclectic and loosely defined belief systems that now fall within the scope of legally recognised solemnising bodies. If they define themselves as ‘non-religious’, why are they functioning as a recognised provider of religious marriage ceremonies under Irish law? The fact that such rites can appear in the State’s marriage statistics as part of the ‘Other religious’ category shows how elastic that category has become.

Now let us look at the data. They confirm that something significant has changed in a relatively short period of time. Ireland is not simply moving from religious weddings to secular ones. Instead, a large and growing number of couples are choosing ceremonies that are religious or spiritual, but outside the mainstream Churches. Between 2014 and 2024, the total number of marriages fell by 7.7pc, from 22,045 to 20,348, even though Ireland’s population grew substantially over the same decade. Catholic ceremonies fell far more sharply, from 13,071 in 2014 to 6,425 in 2024, a drop of almost 51pc. Civil ceremonies are now the most common form of marriage when opposite-sex and same-sex marriages are counted

together. Among opposite-sex couples, however, Catholic ceremonies still remain the largest category, but only just. In 2024, Catholic ceremonies accounted for 6,425 out of 19,680 opposite-sex marriages, or 32.6pc. Civil ceremonies came to 6,392, and Humanist ceremonies to 1,439.

A caveat is needed. Some civil weddings are not necessarily secular in substance. A couple may, for example, have a religious ceremony abroad and then complete a civil registration for legal purposes in Ireland. Likewise, some minority religions do not have State-registered solemnisers, or couples may simply choose a civil registration for convenience.

The decline in church weddings is not confined to Catholics. Smaller Christian denominations have declined even more steeply in percentage terms. Church of Ireland weddings fell from 443 in 2014 to 193 in 2024, a decline of 56pc. Unitarian ceremonies fell by 55pc. (Central Statistics Office) But the most striking development is the continued growth of ‘Other religious’ ceremonies. Among opposite-sex couples, these reached 3,806 in 2024. Adding the Spiritualist Union of Ireland, broadly alternative religious or spiritual ceremonies accounted for over a quarter of all opposite-sex weddings.

Some are difficult to classify. They are not denominations in the ordinary sense. Some are spiritualist, some interfaith, some pagan or nature based. What unites many of them is not doctrine, worship or community, but personalisation. They allow the couple to design a ceremony around themselves. That is precisely the point. The broad trend is unmistakable. Traditional church weddings are declining, while hotel-based, personalised, spiritual ceremonies are growing. Ireland is not simply becoming more secular. In some respects, it is becoming more pagan, more eclectic, and more willing to treat spirituality as a consumer preference.

One big reason is convenience. Weddings can now be celebrated in hotels and other approved venues, and alternative spiritual ceremonies are often offered as part of the overall wedding package. Couples can have the ceremony and reception in the same place, without going near a church. The law, in effect, has reshaped the market. By allowing a wide range of bodies to register solemnisers, and by permitting ceremonies in approved venues, it has created the conditions for a new type of provider to emerge — one that combines spirituality, personalisation and commercial service.

The State should be more honest about what is happening. It is misleading to treat every eclectic,

bespoke, self-invented ceremony provider as if it were a denomination in the ordinary meaning of the word. Some of these bodies may be perfectly sincere, but sincerity alone does not make a religion.

POPE LEO XIV NOTES THE URGENT DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE DURING AN AUDIENCE WITH MEPS

On Monday 25th May 2026, Pope Leo XIV received the members of the Demography Intergroup of the European Parliament at the Vatican. The European Commissioner for the Mediterranean and Demography, Mrs. Dubravka Šuica (Croatia); the Italian Minister for Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities Mrs. Eugenia Roccella; and the OSCE Special Representative on Demographic Change and Security, Mrs. Gudrun Kugler (Austria) and the President of FAFCE, Vincenzo Bassi, were also present at the audience.

The Pope welcomed the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) saying to them "*Your focus on the Continent's demographic question is certainly timely, for this issue signifies an urgent challenge with practical implications for millions of people and their families across what is becoming the 'old continent'*", in a particular insight about one of the most crucial long-term challenge faced by Europe.

This audience was organised the day after the Solemnity of Pentecost and was preceded by a Holy Mass presided by Bishop Mariano Crociata, president of COMECE, in the Choir Chapel of St. Peter's Basilica.

Meeting the members of the Demography Intergroup of the European Parliament in the Clementine Hall, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV took a moment to acknowledge the role of FAFCE in advocating for Europe's future, saying : "*I would note that the Intergroup's cooperation with the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) and with the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) offers an excellent example of how different entities — each with its own area of competence — can work together to secure effective change that will enhance the quality of life for all."* The pope continued by adding that *"This is the impetus Christians are bringing to the European project, so that policies look to human persons in their entirety and always promote the dignity of human beings.*"

The Demography Intergroup of the European Parliament was founded in 1999 and had a very fruitful cooperation with FAFCE since its origin. Most recently, FAFCE President Vincenzo Bassi was the first speaker for the 10th legislative term.

The words of encouragement of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV are a strong message of enhancing this dialogue between elected Members of the European Parliament and civil society organisations.

Later on, the participants took part in the Conference on the family and demographics. The President of FAFCE, Mr. Vincenzo Bassi was invited as a guest speaker and spoke about the importance of family networks as an antidote to "the pandemic of loneliness", highlighted by Pope Leo as one of "*the problems resulting from zero-growth demographics*".

Vincenzo Bassi stated that "*Today's event has an historic impact, as for the first time a group of policy makers was addressed by the Pope on the topic of the demographic winter, encouraging all of us to join forces at all levels: civic society, churches and Governments. Focusing policies on the family is not a cost, but an investment for the future*".

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE OF FAMILY SOLIDARITY TO THE MINISTER OF JUSTICE

Subject: Concerns regarding the direction of the revision of Directive 2012/29/EU – Respect for the Treaties and Subsidiarity

Dear Minister,

It has come to our attention that the finalised revision of Directive 2012/29/EU, concerning minimum standards on the rights, support, and protection of victims of crime, is soon to be voted on in the Council. We wish to alert you to serious legal concerns regarding the inclusion of provisions that go beyond the Union's competences. Specifically, the text now contains references to "safe abortion" in recital 7 and to "sexual and reproductive health services" in Article 9. These inclusions raise significant legal and institutional issues, as abortion and related health policies remain areas explicitly reserved to Member States under the principle of subsidiarity, enshrined in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union, and reaffirmed in Article 168(7) TFEU: "Union action shall respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the definition of their health policy and for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care."

The revision of this Directive is intended to strengthen the rights of victims and enhance cooperation in criminal matters under Article 82(2)(c) TFEU. It should not be used to introduce politically or ethically divisive provisions that fall outside the competences conferred to the European Union.

In light of these considerations, we respectfully urge you to vote against the Directive in its current form. Upholding the principles of subsidiarity and conferral, and respecting the institutional balance established by the Treaties, is essential to ensuring that EU legislation remains lawful and focused on its intended purpose: protecting victims of crime.

We thank you for your attention and for your commitment to safeguarding our country's autonomy, the rule of law and the integrity of the Union's legislative process.

Yours sincerely,
Angelo Bottone

Chairman, Family Solidarity

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