

Family:

an adventure in love

OK. We all admit it. Family life is difficult.

What family does not know the tension of a personality clash, the heartache of a tragedy, the dull pain of daily irritations?

Family life is a challenge because the stakes are so high. What other relationship can hold out so much promise: a lifelong sense of belonging, a rare depth of intimacy, the experience of creating life itself?

Family life is indeed a risky adventure in love; a relational experience at the core of human existence with the power to make or break not only persons, but society itself.

Small wonder that it came under the microscope of Church reflections at the 1980 Synod on the Family where bishops around the world met with Pope John Paul II to feed back the issues and concerns of families in their dioceses.

From that meeting emerged a papal document (technically described as a post-synodal apostolic exhortation) titled *Familiaris Consortio*: 'The Christian Family in the Modern World.'

One night...

'When our baby daughter was very sick, her ear infection made it too painful for her to lie down in her cot. My husband sat up all night cradling her feverish little body in his arms so that she and I could both sleep. This incident has given me an image of God's love which I will treasure always.' (FP)

God's plan for marriage and family. (FC, 11-16)

What is family all about? In *Familiaris Consortio* John Paul II takes us right back to basics: God is love. How simple that sounds; and yet there is nothing more fundamental to human existence. Created in God's image, each person is called into being *through* love and *for* love.

The Church identifies marriage as one clear way in which human persons live out their vocation to love. In marriage husband and wife say to each other: "All of me is yours forever." It is a total gift of one's personhood. Spouses hold nothing back in seeking a deeply personal unity of body, heart and soul. This bond of marital love holds great significance for the Church community. The daily surrender of husband and wife to one another in marriage reflects the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Married love is a special sign or 'sacrament' of the way Christ loves us - completely, unconditionally, forever.

From love comes life

Out of this love between a man and a woman comes more of God's love: a child created in God's image. That the unity of married love expressed in sexual intercourse is inseparable from its lifegiving dimension is an important belief for the Catholic community and explains why it cannot accept contraceptive practices which separate the two. (see FC,32)

Unlike artificial forms of contraception, natural methods of family planning enable a couple to make responsible decisions about the size and spacing of their family without compromising the sacred 'language' of sexual intercourse by which a spouse says: *I give you all of me - my manhood/womanhood, my capacity to bring forth life, my deepest self. And I want to receive and accept all of you.*

It is this selfgiving union between man and woman and the new human life generated, which makes marriage a foundation stone of the wider family community, the Church and society.

Something sacred

'In our love-making, Geoff and I are aware of something sacred happening. It is as if we are saying to each other: "Take, this is my body, given for you." For us, sexual intercourse is a sacred "rite" through which we celebrate and strengthen the love bond between us.' (Sue)

Power-cell of life & love

The role of the Christian family

Put simply: the mission of the family is to BE what it IS, namely 'an intimate communion of life and love' (FC,17). How does it do this? *Familiaris Consortio* identifies four ways:

1. Families form community.

(FC, 18-27)

'Love one another' is the gospel commandment at the heart of family life. If the world is to be a place of self-giving love, then it has to start with the tiniest cell of human loving: the married couple and their family.

Through countless everyday caring actions in the lives of spouses, children, extended family and neighbours, the family acts as a little 'power cell' of hope in the world at large. From the lifegiving presence of a newborn child to the wisdom of an elderly grandparent, 'all members...have the grace and responsibility of building day by day, the communion of persons, making the family "a school of deeper humanity": this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick,

the aged; where there is mutual service every day; where there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows' (FC, 21).

Loving each other is not easy. Every family has its share of tension and conflict. *Familiaris Consortio* acknowledges that 'family communion can only be preserved...through a great spirit of sacrifice' (n.21). Family members are called to develop gospel qualities such as generosity, openness, forgiveness and to recognise each other's dignity and gifts. Strengthened by the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, families find the grace to move towards the ardent desire of Jesus 'that they may be one' (Jn 17:21).

2. Families serve life. (FC, 28-41)

While having children is not the only fruit of marriage, it is without doubt a precious way in which the family brings forth new life into the world. In this way each new person bears the imprint of the divine image, the original blessing of the Creator.

Bringing forth a child includes the responsibility of helping that new

The decision

'I have a childhood memory of my parents standing in the kitchen exchanging sharp words. Suddenly my father broke the cycle of tension, went up to my mum and tapped her gently on the arm saying expectantly, "Hey, tell me something..." Her scowl relaxed into a half-smile before returning her half of the equation. "I love you," she said. I came to understand that this little exchange, repeated over 42 years of marriage, symbolised for them a decision: No issue is so big that we will allow it to come between our love for each other.' (VC)

A forgiving home

'For years after my divorce I prayed that I would be a good parent to my children. Then one day it dawned on me that the best prayer I could pray was a prayer of forgiveness. Jack had left me and I had never forgiven him for that. Of course, I thought I had, but instead I had simply shut down part of my heart. Here I was trying to be "super-mum", but ignoring the fact that my parenthood had come from my marriage, and the more at peace I was with my ex-husband, the more at peace my children would be.

'After that my prayer changed. Each day I asked Jesus to bring healing into the woundedness of my married life. I prayed that, with this forgiveness, I could communicate to my children that they were the fruit of our love, even if that love had been far from perfect. Many tears flowed. I began to realise the extent of the pain beneath my "super-parent" image.

'Over time I have seen the power of this kind of prayer. There is a growing peace in our home. The children feel freer to talk about their daddy, what they miss about him, how they feel angry sometimes. And I can handle their questions peacefully. Bitterness wells up from time to time, but I have a better way to deal with it.' (Terry)

Bright spots and shadows for the family today. (see FC, 4-10)

***Familiaris Cosortio* is responding to a critical moment in history; an era in which the family finds itself grappling with a multitude of conflicting forces - some positively enriching, others destructive. In the pressure-cooker of life, it is not always easy to distinguish between these social forces. Sometimes a positive attribute such as 'personal autonomy' is exaggerated and becomes selfish pursuit, bringing not freedom but inner slavery; and a seemingly distasteful demand such as 'self-sacrifice' can in fact bring a depth of inner freedom never thought possible.**

Through *Familiaris Consortio* the Church calls all families to a careful 'discernment'; i.e. an informed and prayerful reflection on the meaning of life and its fundamental values. In this way families can make wise judgments amidst the complex array of choices offered in today's society.

at the heart of the **Church's** mission

person to live a fully human life.

Familiaris Consortio emphasizes the fact that parents are the prime educators of their children. Certainly other people and agencies (e.g., schools) can help. But when it comes to forming a child in God's laws of love, nothing can replace the impact of the parents and the family community. It is in the atmosphere of the home that a child 'catches' a spirit of love...or discovers its lack. It is through the religious practices of the home that a child first senses a reverence for God...or feels the absence of faith. It is in the family unit that a child first learns 'those social virtues which every society needs' (FC,37), including a spirit of service, self-sacrifice and respect for one's sexuality.

The task of the Christian family to educate its members is a true ministry through which the Gospel is spread, says *Familiaris Consortio*. Do not think of your family responsibilities as something separate or secondary to the mission of the Church. When you teach your children (and they teach you!) to love, to pray, to celebrate

the sacraments and to serve one's neighbour, you are not just 'helping' the Church's mission, you are living its very mission!

So central is the family to the life and mission of the Church that it is often called the 'domestic church' or the 'little church'. 'The family, called together by word and sacrament as the Church of the home, is both teacher and mother, the same as the worldwide Church' (FC,38).

Queen Emily

'Emily is our youngest child. At a family meal on the eve of her First Communion day, all her big brothers and sisters decided to dress up in formal wear—suits, bow ties, evening dresses, the works—to make it a very special occasion in her honour. Pretty amazing given their usual attire of jeans and T-shirts!

'We had a lot of laughs and Emily felt like a queen. The Body of Christ we received the next day was all the more a special experience because of the presence of Christ we had celebrated in one another the night before.' (M & MJ)

Pastoral care of the family

(see FC,65-85)

In this section, which addresses the many difficulties facing couples and families, two key themes emerge: COMPASSION and TRUTH. The beliefs held by the Church about marriage and family can be painful for many people. The wounds of hurt, failure and disillusionment run deep. Faced with such pain we can be tempted to stop speaking the truth; for instance, we might avoid saying things like 'marriage is forever'. But when we do this we only undermine our capacity to live the truth. We rob married people of encouragement, we rob our children of inspiration, and we fail to recognize the enormity of a divorced person's loss. Instead of diluting our Catholic beliefs, let us courageously SPEAK them with love and sensitivity; let us gently LISTEN to each other's experience of joy, loss, hope, loneliness and REACH OUT with healing hands.

Families have a vital role in protecting human life.

Against the pessimism of anti-life attitudes that cast a shadow over the world, families are called to say 'YES' to life.

It is through the supportive, practical love of families that the Church can most effectively express its conviction:

'...that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness... In each human life she sees the splendour of that 'YES', that 'Amen', who is Christ himself. To the "No" which assails and afflicts the world, she replies with this living "Yes"' (FC, 30).

Think/Talk/Act: Describe a family whom you admire for the way its members live this 'Yes!' to life. In a letter or phone call, communicate your admiration.

Family:

first & vital cell of society

3. Families participate in the development of society

(FC, 43-44)

In a society that is becoming increasingly dehumanized by its glorification of material and technological power, families can offer an essential humanizing and personalizing influence. In a family, one's value as a person is not determined by salary, status, age or talents. Rather, a family says to each member: *We love you simply for who you are: you belong to us.*

By virtue of their lifestyle of mutual giving and receiving, families are a potent force in society. Since a lack of love is at the root of so many social ills, the world's future depends heavily on the strength and quality of family life.

Through practical hospitality and service among their neighbours, families have an enormous contribution to make to social justice and development. In turn, the State must recognise that *'the family is a society in its own original right...The State*

'Thanks to love within the family, the Church can and ought to take on a more homelike or family dimension, developing a more human and fraternal style of relationships' (FC, 64).

• What lessons from family life can we apply to the way our parish/diocese operates?

cannot and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform on their own or in free associations; instead it must positively favour and encourage as far as possible initiative by families' (FC, 45).

4. Families share in the life and mission of the Church.

Just as we refer to Jesus as 'prophet, priest and king', so is the Christian family called to be:

(i) Prophetic

The witness of a Christian family is a 'luminous sign' to its neighbours. Families have a mission to speak and share their lived faith with enthusiasm and conviction. (see FC, 51-54)

(ii) Sacred

How does a family stay open to God? Some tips in this section include family prayer (e.g., grace before meals, reading the scriptures), a spirit of forgiveness, drawing strength from the sacraments, fostering a love for the mother of Jesus. (see FC, 55-62)

'For those who have no natural family the doors of the great family which is the Church...must be opened even wider. No one is without a family in this world: the Church is a home and family for everyone...' (FC, 85).

The credibility of the above statement rests on the hospitality of our own hearts and homes. In what ways has your (i) family (ii) parish offered somebody 'a place to call home'?

Healing love

'In my neighbourhood lives a couple with three adopted children. The children all suffered abuse at their original homes. One child had been so emotionally damaged that his speech was impaired. For a long time he hardly spoke. Thankfully, his adoptive parents have given him a lifegiving home. With all the love lavished upon him, a bond of trust is strengthening and his speech is returning.' (CA)

(iii) Outreaching

The family's mission as 'a community of service' extends beyond itself to the wider community. Families are called to exercise their social conscience as a natural expression of the Christ-like laws of service and justice at work in their homes. (see FC, 63-64)

Conclusion

Familiaris Consortio concludes with a reminder about the power of family love to change the world. The three year public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth did not arise out of the blue. It was in the hidden and uncelebrated years of family life—growing up in the home of Joseph and Mary—that the foundations of his ministry were laid. By reflecting on the impact of the Holy Family in history, may we have hope in the love which lies 'hidden' in our own families and its bearing on the future of the world. With John Paul II we pray, *'May each Christian family become a "little church" in which the mystery of the Church of Christ is mirrored and given new life'* (FC, 86).