

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 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 forgiveness and 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 was imperfect.

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 more peacefully than before. (Terry)

It takes courage to be family

In *Familiaris Consortio*, two key themes emerge: COMPASSION and TRUTH. Catholic beliefs about marriage and family can be painful for many people. The wounds of hurt 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 recognise the enormity of a divorced person's loss. Instead of diluting our beliefs, let us 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.

Jesus grew up in a family

Family love can change the world. Think of Jesus of Nazareth. His public ministry 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. May we have confidence in the love which lies 'hidden' in our own families and its bearing on the future of the world. May we respond to John Paul II's summons:

'Family, become what you are.' (FC,17)

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Family

An **adventure**
in love

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)

I have always been lucky in my life even though people have trouble believing me when I say this. "You're in a wheelchair. How is that lucky?" The answer is I have the best family in the world. (Chris)

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

What family does not know the fatigue of constant giving, 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, then, that the Church is so interested in families - their joys and hopes, worries and sorrows. In fact, one of the first things John Paul II did as Pope was to hold a world meeting of Bishops on the topic of 'Family' from which emerged a landmark document called: *Familiaris Consortio: The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*.

This year, 2006, is the 25th anniversary of that document, so let's revisit some of its pearls of wisdom...



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)

- What are some of the ways you give of yourself in spousal and other family relationships?
- What strengths and sacrifices have shaped your experience of family?

All three of our children are gifted in a large number of diverse ways. Most importantly, they are wonderful people and greatly loved. People who regard the fact of their having a disability as their prime feature are totally missing the point. Any child is a blessing and a gift to her or his parents. A child with a disability is no different. (Mary)

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? In four ways:

1. Families form community

'Love one another' says the Gospel. If the world is to be a place of love, it has to start with the tiniest cell of human loving: the married couple and their family.

In the eyes of the Church, sexual intercourse involves a sacred 'language' of the body 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 its openness to the generation of new human life, which makes marriage a foundation stone of the wider family community, the Church and society.

Through countless loving actions in the daily lives of spouses, children, extended family and neighbours, the family acts as a little 'power cell' of hope in the world. From the presence of a newborn child to the wisdom of an elderly grandparent, all members have the grace and task of building community, making the family 'a school of deeper humanity'. (FC, 21)

2. Families serve life

Bringing up a child is one of the many precious fruits of marriage. It includes the responsibility of helping the young person to live a fully human life. *Parents are the prime educators of their children.* Certainly other people and agencies can help; but nothing can replace the parents and the family.



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 family is the first and fundamental school of social living.' (FC,37)

Says *Familiaris Consortio*: Do not think of your family responsibilities as 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!*

3. Families shape society

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

4. Families have a mission

Just as we refer to Jesus as 'prophet, priest and king', so are Christian families called to:

- Share their faith with enthusiasm and conviction;
- Be open to the sacred;
- Live justly and exercise their social conscience.

Queen Emily

At a family meal on the eve of Emily's first communion day, all her big brothers and sisters dressed up in formal wear - suits, bow ties, evening dresses, the works - and made 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)

- What's one of your fondest memories of growing up in a family?

'The future of humanity passes by way of the family.' (FC,86)