

# Just between Us...

Newsletter of the Bethany Family Institute  
PO Box 2858 Wolverhampton WV3 0XL

Edited and published by Elizabeth Davies, MA



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**Has the Church given up on the family?** We don't think so, but sometimes our faith is tested! You can read our review of the English & Welsh report on Evangelisation on page 3. It's fair to say that it's set us thinking. Caring for families in the church takes more than straightforward ministry. Families also need what Pope John Paul called 'an environment favourable for development'. At the moment, we seem to be experiencing somewhat of an ozone problem. The family section of our atmosphere is rapidly depleting, yet the vote is still out on how best to solve this problem. Without families we simply cannot survive as a faith community. So much of the work of the Kingdom depends on the participation of Christian families. It therefore behoves us all—at parish, diocesan and national level - to consider what constitutes a favourable environment and how we can make sure our families benefit from this.

**Seeing God in Love With Your Family**, our Parents' Week resource, has been a great success. Our sincere thanks go to every one of you who took the trouble to spread the word. It will still be available once the festivities die down—but without the Parents' Week references. Many of you have said that you will use it with parents of children being prepared for the sacraments, so that is wonderful news. We are planning more of this kind of inexpensive resource for parishes to use, so if you have any suggestions please let us know. First on our list is one for Advent & Christmas.

**A word of welcome** must go to John Anthony, the National Co-ordinator for Marriage & Family Life appointed by the same Bishops who commissioned the report on Evangelisation. His appointment is truly a sign of great hope and we look forward to the many fruits that having a co-ordinator, at any level, brings.



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## Diary Dates

- Oct 15th Churches Together For Families meeting. London. Topic: Refugee families. Contact Sue Burrridge for details: sue.burrridge@c-of-e.org.uk
- Oct 21st-27th Parents Week: Images of Families. See page 9 for details.
- Oct 25th-27th Living Life's Changes with Fr Alban Byron SJ & Frances Trotman. Loyola Hall, Warrington Road, Rainhill, Prescot L35 6NZ. Tel 0151 426 4137. Email: loyola@clara.net
- Oct 25th-27th Beginning Experience. Marie Repatrice Centre, Wimbledon. Contact Pat: 020 8660 3112
- Oct 26th Parenting MOT! St Antony's, Forest Gate, London. Contact: Martina Coyle. Tel: 01277 265191 or email martinacoyle@blueyonder.co.uk
- Nov 2nd Rainbows Registered Director Continuing Development. Birmingham Family Conference Centre. Contact: Robin Cooper or Tia Dcaccia. Tel: 01933 355175 Email: rainbows.dc@virgin.net
- Jan 17th-19th 2003 ASDC Weekend in Llandudno, at the Loreto Centre. Tel: 0161 483 3671 for more details

### Readers Question Time: Associations of Families

*"In recent years I have been thinking about establishing an association of families in the diocese in response to Familiaris Consortio and its call to do so as a pastoral response. I notice a document from the Pontifical Council for the Family makes the same appeal in its preparatory notes for the World Meeting of Families in Manila in January 2003. Do you know of any diocese that has tried to do this? I suspect that it is fraught with difficulties e.g. appearing to be exclusive, knowing what to do about cohabiting couples and those in second unions who want to help their children grow in faith. The list is endless.*

*Any thoughts on this would be appreciated."*

Please send your comments/response to Elizabeth Davies. Bethany Family Institute. PO Box 2858 Wolverhampton WV3 0XL or email: elizabethdavies@bethanyfamilyinstitute.com

# Has the Church given up on the family?

## A Bethany Family Institute response to *Evangelisation in England & Wales. a report to the Catholic Bishops*

This report is the result of a research project commissioned by the interim management committee of the proposed Agency for Evangelisation. The authors were based respectively at the CMS Mission House in London (Knights) and Ushaw College (Murray). Their remit was:

- To consider the principles of mission and evangelisation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
- To review current practice.
- To make recommendations for the future development of evangelisation in England and Wales.

The report is 172 pages long, and attractively published. As some of the survey responses have been available on the web for some while, this final document was particularly eagerly awaited. However, after reading it from a family perspective, both of us here at Bethany share misgivings about the authors' recommendations to the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales. We feel that they have failed to take into full account some of the major findings of their own research, as well as the view of family, as foundational to all aspects of church, that our faith proclaims.

### **Families at the 'Coal Face'**

To put our concerns into context, it is essential to note that those surveyed (parishioners, seminarians, parish priests and bishops/diocesan workers) repeatedly affirmed family and friends as central to their journey of faith. This is reported several times in the body of the report:

"The 'coal face' of evangelisation is located in families...." (p50)

"It is very clear that the means by which people are most effectively evangelised rely predominantly on human relationships and pastoral care. This is evidenced by the strongly affirmative responses in elements relating to the influence of family, friends, having children, marriage..." (p119)

"What is very apparent yet again, is that it

is in the context of the family that faith would seem to be most effectively communicated and nurtured. Secondary to this influence is the importance attached to a sense of belonging in the local Church" (p121)

"Our research shows a high percentage of active Catholics attribute their sense of the Gospel to their families and personal friendships. However they need supporting and equipping. Resourcing the domestic Church to assist families raise their children in the faith must be a priority" (p141)

"Human relationships between Christians and their families, friends, and neighbours are the most powerful evangelising force in England and Wales" (p142)

The relationship between these domestic churches and the parish is noted as being rather less than symbiotic:

"supporting families (is)... indicated as (an) area where the parish is generally least engaged with the needs of the world" (p91)

The authors even express concern for a future where families might increasingly become less able to continue their indispensable evangelisation:

"in the light of predicted trends in Church demographics... this primary influence of family as a contribution to evangelisation ... is likely to be lost at an increasing rate in the coming years." (p 122)

### **Inadequate Recommendations**

Reading these statements gave us great hope that the report would conclude by recommending a whole-hearted and holistic policy of supporting church families as a matter of some immediacy. It is extremely disheartening therefore, for us to report that on turning to the final chapter (13 pages) of Priorities and Recommendations, we discovered that the only mentions of family were these:

"..the Church should be the 'home and school of communion'. This must apply to every level of the Church's life including the domestic Church..." (p165)

"The formation of children and young adults and ministry to young families must be special moments of formation and evangelisation" (p167)

We think that these rather weak expressions betray a huge lack of understanding, firstly of family (and therefore of church) and of how families can be cared for by the larger family of the parish. We also contend that the document fails to appreciate the family's role as a *subject* of evangelisation, a source of life where God's Word is often strongly expressed through the daily living of the Gospel in the family. In reality, that's where most Catholics were evangelised in the past, and where we would hope that they will continue to be evangelised in the future. Other forms of evangelisation are important, but the family remains the primary community where this sacred act takes place -- day after day, year after year.

#### When is a church not a church?

This might have surprised us more, had the authors not already given evidence of a tendency to go right up to the door of the home, without asking to come in. Although they refer to 'domestic church', they seem not to have translated the deeper meanings of *ecclesia domestica*. On a semantic level (and much is made of semantics in the first chapter) this is illustrated by the following statement: "we must make our homes and our ecclesial home, places where the Gospel flowers" (p16). Many domestic churches will rightly be amazed that home and ecclesial home are different entities.

On a more pragmatic level, the report repeatedly describes 'ecclesial reality' without explicitly mentioning the family:

"All ecclesial realities: parishes, communities, movements, lay associations, individual Christians in whatever state of life, are called to be evangelisers" (p48)

"... other ecclesial realities had become more significant. Small groups, communities, movements, conferences etc.." (p 84)

Indeed, it ultimately becomes apparent that the authors really are unaware of the many family ministry initiatives in place up and down the countries. The section on 'formal individual evangelisation initiatives' (pp141-3) is prefaced with a signal that these formal structures might offer the 'focussed preparation' required by the networks of families and friends that evangelise each other so efficiently. Unfortunately their list neglects to mention *any* specifically family oriented structures. At this juncture it is worth mentioning that of the 23 dioceses in England and Wales, 11 have diocesan workers in marriage and family life. Of these seven are paid and have diocesan offices.

#### 'Relational' Aspects Essential

This 'oversight' is all the more puzzling given the emphasis that the authors place on the importance of 'the relational' in evangelisation:

"*Missio Dei* relocates the primary weight of the concept of mission away from Church structures.... to God. Christian mission becomes seen as the participation of the Church in the activity of the Holy Trinity... the images and actions growing from a Trinitarian theology of *missio Dei* are relational (love, dialogue, sharing, community, solidarity, integral human development etc.)" (p57)

It really is not a stretch to connect these relational 'images and actions' with the family. In nurturing the relational aspect of family life, where primary evangelisation takes place, then *de facto* we build the relational aspect of parish and societal life, where secondary evangelisation happens.

From a family perspective, a way of approaching all church life that was strongly recommended by John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*, we must state our belief that this report has failed to comprehend or appreciate the seminal prophetic role of the Christian family, especially that of parents. Whilst the evidence of the authors' own research incontrovertibly re-emphasizes the importance of family as foundational to faith, once again an

opportunity of articulating what can and should be done to help families is missed.

No calls are made for further research into the prophetic role of the family. No mention is made of all the tools and resources that already exist for 'equipping' families in their vocation. No mention is made of the Pope's repeated calls for urgent pastoral support for families. Family is once again sidelined, rather than being a central aspect to the discussion.

Instead we have calls for more youth work, more investigation of the impact of the New Movements and one woolly statement about "appropriate training for and formation in evangelisation for all Christians" (p169). Instead of parenting programmes and relationship education, we have calls for more research into collaborative ministry. Whilst we would not disagree with this last recommendation, we think that collaboration, like charity, begins at home.

The report is a well-intentioned document with many excellent points. It's unfortunate that it fails to provide a full description of the processes of evangelisation that have built the good church of the past and will continue to do so in the future. To again echo the Pope: The future of society and the church pass through the family. This statement should be read as both descriptive and prescriptive. If evangelisation fails to include the family as a major player in the game, we all will be losers in the end. And the game is too important to let this ever happen.

Evangelisation in England & Wales: a report to the Catholic Bishops. Philip Knights & Andrea Murray. Catholic Communications Service, 2002. ISBN: 090524124X

*We have gathered some quotes on evangelisation and the family from the church documents of the last few years. We are infilling all the remaining spaces in this issue with them. Please read and reflect on them. Clearly a lot of work remains to be done in raising awareness of families' importance to the wider church, but perhaps restating what we believe will help!*

From Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975):

"At different moments in the Church's history and also in the Second Vatican Council, the family has well deserved the beautiful name of "domestic Church." This means that **there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church.** Furthermore, the family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates.

**In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelise and are evangelised.** The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them.

And such a family becomes the evangeliser of many other families, and of the neighbourhood of which it forms part" (#71)

From Familiaris Consortio (1981)

Since God's plan for marriage and the family touches men and women in the concreteness of their daily existence in specific social and cultural situations, the church ought to apply herself to understanding the situations within which marriage and the family are lived today, in order to fulfil her task of serving. This understanding is therefore an inescapable requirement of the work of evangelisation. (#4)

As the synod repeated, ..., the future of evangelisation depends in great part on the church of the home. This apostolic mission of the family is rooted in baptism and receives from the grace of the sacrament of marriage new strength to transmit the faith, to sanctify and transform our present society according to God's plan (#52)

The ministry of evangelisation carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable. It assumes the characteristics typical of family life itself, which should be interwoven with love, simplicity, practicality and daily witness (#54)

## Evangelisation in Ordinary Families

David M. Thomas. Bethany Family Institute

Evangelisation is becoming a very Catholic word. At last, it is becoming so. We find it first embedded in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It became the hallmark of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI and it's the primary reason why Pope John Paul II has so many frequent flyer miles. Evangelisation is defined in the Catholic Church as the primary process through which the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is communicated by his followers to those who have not yet encountered him. Communication comes through word and deed.

Most Catholics receive their first experience of Jesus through their parent's words and gestures of love. Often parents do an incredibly wonderful job as being the first to present the Gospel reality to their children, but they are totally unaware of it happening. It would be a great advance if the church pointed to and valued this esteemed and irreplaceable sacred work of parents. They are doing God's work and they don't know it!

Recently I was offering a workshop on how the family brings God into their ordinary life and I mentioned how parents are the first evangelists of their children. I could tell that my words were not getting through. A woman in the back of the room asked if I could give some examples of this. I did and later I sat down and put together a longer list of when the family is an evangelising community. I focused on the role of parents.

Parents communicate the Gospel when:

- They treat their children with respect and kindness
- They bring God into their family conversation when it feels appropriate
- They share with their children their own worries as well as hopes
- They speak well of all people
- They take interest in the world of their children
- They speak of death and illness with Christian hope
- They work alongside their children in doing some of the family's chores
- They express love and affection for their children
- They pray together as a family
- They find meaningful ways to help the needy of the world
- They monitor and talk about what's being offered by the media
- They care for pets and their property
- They joyfully attend parish events
- They take time to have fun with each other
- They try to keep connected with family members at a distance
- They really celebrate birthdays and other important anniversaries
- They try to notice if anyone in the family feels down or sad
- They share food with each other at any time of the day or night
- They watch TV commercials together and discuss their messages
- They take walks together in sunshine, rain and snow

The list is as long as there are positive and love-filled family activities. They are rooted in the belief that as we become more human, we become more divine. Family evangelisation acknowledges that most of what Jesus did as the Light of the World he did through ordinary human gestures of support and caring. Especially when children are young, parents are given the opportunity for Christian heroism almost every day when they give their all for their children. This is living Christian witness, a daily martyrdom that plants the seeds for the church of the future.

## Introducing.....John Anthony.

National Co-ordinator for Marriage and Family Life in England & Wales

**1: Can you tell us a little about your career to date and what led you to this new post of National Co-ordinator for MFL? What skills have you developed that you see being of use to you now? What in your background has made you so interested in family?**

Perhaps I can start off with where I come from in terms of family. My immediate family goes in fives. We have five, and we are both one of five. There are two sixes, my father's, and one of my brothers is blessed(?) with six sons. It has all been a struggle, but the rewards by far outweigh the challenge. Being in a family helps you to grow up with the edges chipped off you. There has been so much negativity about having children, worry about growth in population and the limited resources of the earth, that there is almost a moral imperative not to have a family.

In thinking about family issues I invariably revert back to the logic that God's will is translated through the Church, and one of the dominant messages of the Good News is that we are made to be open to children. It's a contradiction that we profess hope and trust in God, but at the same time close ourselves to children because we don't think God will help us to provide for them. And what does it tell us about our supposed love for our children if we encourage social policies that deliberately leave ourselves closed to this most precious and enjoyable gift? What is more wonderful than our own children?

This view has been constantly reinforced through my experiences in dealing with people. For want of something to do when I left school I joined the police force in London. There was no great altruistic motivation, but I was shocked at what I met. Dysfunctional families were causing social damage completely out of proportion to their numbers. One problem family in one estate often caused misery to everyone else living there. As family breakdown increased so did the problems. Statistics explain this, but many of us have come to know this by growing up with it.

I gradually realised that no amount of policing can resolve the social problems caused by family break-

down, and no amount of social engineering can build up the family. Social agencies are divided on how best to deal with it, and increasingly there is a drain on the public pocket. But, not to try is to give in to pessimism, and I was involved in many initiatives, some very expensive, to limit or repair the social damage. But any success was, in the main, of short duration and of very limited relief to residents of afflicted areas.

Having been a dedicated lacklustre student at school I joined the further education treadmill in my thirties, starting with a part-time philosophy degree at Birkbeck College, and then a masters in political theory at the LSE. I then completed a law degree. These courses seemed to have been run through with a common thread of almost institutionalised aversion to Catholic teaching. Especially, surprisingly I thought, in family law. Very much the liberal agenda. But my dealings with people *in extremis* and social welfare institutions indicated that whatever government or local authorities introduce to thwart the consequences of family breakdown, is countered by reformulations of negating patterns of behaviour. Young people will not be patronised. Where they are let down they will react accordingly.

It has almost become a privilege to be able to enjoy a sound and complete family life, and I am one of a generation that was privileged. But I think it is a basic entitlement for all children, and it is we as adults who are failing them. Society has to grow up and it is the role of the Church to enlighten those around us. So when I happened upon an advertisement for this post I was very pleased that the job existed, and even more pleased to be offered it.

**2: What do you see as your first priorities as National Co-ordinator? What are your first impressions of working in the church? What are the basic tasks of this new post?**

Being new to the role of Church employee I have been encouraged by the sense of mission and vocation that I have encountered so far, and by the high levels of expertise. There is a wealth of knowledge on which to draw. So far I have been working out priorities, taking advice from practitio-

ners working in the areas of marriage support and family life ministry, meeting other people with an interest in the subject, and attending informative events. Support for the marriage and family life ministry within the Church is clearly the first priority. I hope to tap into all the activity that impacts on the family, and then broadcast and promote this work through the diocesan network.

**3: How can the church help the family? Why is family life so important in the life of the church? What kind of priorities would you suggest that the bishops embrace in support of family life?**

The Church is family. Much of Catholic teaching and much pastoral activity is based on the family. But the Church is in a difficult situation. Whilst recognising the difficulties, and providing pastoral guidance, it has to be open to the wider social impact of its methods. But family tensions are compounded by the modern world, and pastors are criticised if they are seen as too legalistic. We are torn between material "wants" and that which is good. It is increasingly difficult to steer away from social forces and to protect our children from themselves. We are surrounded by temptation.

The Church does have a problem with its portrayal publicly. It speaks with authority, but many now choose what they accept and what they reject. We see all around us evidence of the consequences of an apparent rejection of Christian values, but we also have to cope with the confusion caused by those who share our faith yet reject aspects they don't like. The undermining of marriage has been facilitated by this moral confusion. But the consequences to the people involved, especially the children, are very real. Now that the media is so instant, it is vital that the voice of the Church is seen as one.

I would like to see the bishops give prominence to marriage and family life ministry, at the expense of other concerns. There is a real and urgent need to highlight the importance of marriage, to encourage programmes in parishes that support marriage and family life. To introduce programmes that deal with real issues, with painful issues, which recognise the pressures that exist in *any* human relationship. All married people, of all ages, should be encouraged to participate. Thus the younger married will benefit

from the experiences and insights of those who have been married for a long time. "There is nothing new under the sun". Marriage is the sacrament of the laity, and the laity should be the prime movers.

Family life is important for the Church because in a way it *is* the Church, the basic social unit, the domestic Church. Through the sacraments we progress to pass on the Church to others. Without the family children would be brought up according to the rules of the jungle. The stronger would always win. The more stable the family is, the better is the growing environment for children. The richer family life is, the richer is the Church for it.

**4: What is your dream for family life and the church?**

The Church provides a rich source of wisdom which is argued against, both within and outside the Church. There are sound practical reasons for the Church's stance on issues that deal with family life, mostly reasons which support the joy of family life. We work too hard, we worry too much, we are materialistic. But what is more delightful than the little hand of a child or grandchild dragging us from our chair to go and look for something, or to admire the picture they've drawn on our wall? The Church frees us to enjoy the family, we don't have to abide by the industrial revolution work ethic. We don't have to have fantastic possessions, or over sophisticated life styles. We are free to be poor without shame.

When family life is rich and full there is no need for anything else. Everything seems to follow from it with a momentum of its own. Far better, I think, than the life of the successful City worker who works every hour of the day to pay for that lonely pent-house flat in Docklands.

My dream is for society to re-embrace marriage as the greatest good for our children. For a society which does not place all its values on our material possessions. For a society which loves its children, and which does everything in its power to ensure their happiness.

Contact John at 39 Ecclestone Square, London SW1V 1BX Email: [anthonyj@cbcew.org.uk](mailto:anthonyj@cbcew.org.uk)

## Celebrating Parents' Week



**PARENTS'  
WEEK** October 21-27

☺ The third annual Parents' Week begins on Monday, October 21<sup>st</sup>. Organised by the National Family and Parenting Institute, the week is a national celebration aimed at raising awareness of parents and families, and in particular, the importance of the way children are reared.

This year's theme is "Images of Families". In an examination of the ways in which families are perceived in Britain today, one national discussion will focus on the portrayal of families in TV soaps. But, from a faith perspective, Parents' Week offers an ideal opportunity for families and their parishes to re-examine their own image of families and the role of the family in the broader context of church.

This is especially timely given the recent publication of *Evangelisation in England and Wales*. The matter of "resourcing the domestic Church to assist families raise their children in the faith" was rightly recognised as a "priority" (p141). Connecting the do-

mestic with the parish church in a way that fully appreciates and respects the characteristics, duties and responsibilities of each arena, remains largely unexplored territory. Perhaps Parents' Week is the ideal time to begin this initiative.

### Suggestions for marking Parents' Week

If you haven't already done so, begin a listening process in the parish. Ask parents what they think the church could do to help them have a more satisfying family life. Gather oral or written responses from individuals, small groups or at a parish meeting. Reflect as a parish on the findings before exploring ways to respond to them meaningfully and positively. Encourage families to become what John Paul II has described as "leaders in this new season of hope" (Address to the World Meeting of Families 1994)

Enable parents to have some time alone without their children. Arrange an evening crèche or a babysitting service for the youngsters so that parents can have a breather. Encourage the adults to sit down, and relax rather than catch up on housework. If you don't have sufficient volunteers consider employing child-care workers.

Arrange a parish social where all families are welcome. A barn dance is a great inter-generational activity, which also fosters community. Invite everyone to bring a dish to share in order both to reduce costs and emulate the early church.

Invite parishioners to bring pictures or photographs of their parents to the altar in your offertory procession at Sunday Mass. Put them on display over the next month while your community celebrates the divinity and humanity present in these people.

Distribute copies of the Bethany Family Institute booklet *Seeing God in Love With Your Family*. It helps parents and others to see how important they are in the development of their children's relationship with God, and how everyday family life is packed with grace-filled moments. Available at 20p a copy plus p&p, download an order form at [www.bethanyfamilyinstitute.com](http://www.bethanyfamilyinstitute.com) or by post from The Bethany Family Institute, PO Box 2858, Wolverhampton WV3 0XL.

As a variation on the regular appeal on behalf of the missions, have a parent (or parents) speak for a few minutes at Mass on what their life is like, what it means to be a parent nowadays, and what kind of help they get, or may need, from the parish community. Many parents would find this daunting, but a ready-prepared talk, written in conjunction with other parents, might make it easier for them.



In your liturgies this week, reflect the huge variety of both parents and parenting styles. Pray for new parents, parents of toddlers, primary and school age children, parents whose children are becoming adults, parents whose children have left home, parents whose children have died, parents of sick and differently abled children, parents who struggle with difficult children. Pray for single parents, parents whose marriages are breaking down and for parents who are themselves sick or dying. Pray that the parents of your parish will receive the support they need as first teachers of their children. Pray that the families of your parish will grow in their priestly, prophetic and kingly responsibilities.

Devote your second collection on Sunday October 27<sup>th</sup> to the work of supporting parenting.

Invest in the parenting skills of your parishioners. The Family Caring Trust offers inexpensive, stand-alone, kits for running courses (with a spiritual dimension) for parents of children of all ages. The latest offering 'I Have a Million Things To Do' is especially aimed at helping parents confirm their children's faith. Family Caring Trust, 8 Ashtree Enterprise Park, Newry, Co. Down. BT34 1BY Tel: 028 3026 4174. Website: [www.familycaring.co.uk](http://www.familycaring.co.uk)

#### Further resources

Churches Together for Families has produced a set of resources called 'Family Friendly Church'. These questionnaires, checklists and discussion tools can be downloaded free of charge from their web site and are also valuable for collaborating with your Christian neighbours to foster family ministry. Website: [www.churchesandfamilies/resources/index.php](http://www.churchesandfamilies/resources/index.php)

The National Family and Parenting Institute also have a downloadable pack for celebrating Parents' Week. Website: [www.nfpi.org](http://www.nfpi.org)

#### Final Word:

With widespread attention in the media, and from policymakers and professionals, Parents' Week focuses attention on the needs and concerns of parents, and aims to make Britain more family-friendly. As a faith-community that places family at the very centre of all that we do, our families deserve that we make our presence felt in this campaign.

#### *A prayer for parents everywhere...*

*Lord, help us to recognize what is important in life.  
Help us to see the simple truths which you have taught us,  
about how to live, and how to love one another;  
and show us how to apply these to the complicated world in which we find ourselves. Amen.*

*(from: Family Prayer, by Nick Aiken & Rowan Williams. SPCK, 2002)*

## Reflections from a former Diocesan FLM Co-ordinator

Sr Anne Conway, OSU

The longer I have worked in ministry to family, the more convinced I am that family is at the very centre of the Christian endeavour to love one another, as Christ has loved us.

Every activity motivated by love makes God present in our lives. Family life is full of such activity. God's love is expressed in the everyday, ordinary events of family life; in the dozens of daily decisions, which are rooted in care for someone else. This is holiness in action.

Family life is full of such love, full of God's presence. What we need to do is notice this. I don't think we are good at this - at noticing. We just get on with what needs to be done and think no more about it. We certainly don't think we are being holy. This is where we need to stop and take time to recognise, affirm and celebrate the goodness or "God-ness" of everyday family life: a significant energy for the renewal of the Christian community and society.

As I write, one of the wise and effective ideas from Family Caring Trust's Parenting Courses comes to mind: behaviour that is noticed is encouraged, reinforced. A priority for FLM is to encourage families to notice and affirm all the unselfish loving and goodness in their families and to channel that energy and example into the wider community. Good family practice - and by that I mean the everyday commitment to live loving relationships amid the ups and downs of family life - deserves to be noticed and recognised as a witness and antidote in a society, which appears to dismiss the values of lifelong loving and human respect. The living and sharing of such good practice is the very core of the evangelising mission of the family. Family Ministry is the key to direct focus, deliver support and empower families to fulfil their mission in the Christian community.

I have been privileged to work as co-ordinator of Family Life Ministry in the Welsh diocese of Menevia and more recently in the diocese of Leeds. These afforded me very different experiences of establishing an initiative in support of family life. In both places, I have been blessed by the support and example of wonderful family people, who have

shared their hopes, their fears, their laughter with me; who have enriched me and others with the wisdom of their unique experience of family.

In Menevia, I joined a small and pro-active diocesan Family Ministry working party, which included the Bishop. The fact that it was a working party, with direct involvement of the Bishop, lent wonderful moral and practical support to me as the newcomer, invited to act as co-ordinator and field worker. All of us worked on a voluntary basis. We shared an enthusiasm for family ministry, which led to a variety of collaborative ventures: diocesan family workshops; diocesan family fun day; diocesan family Mass, with commissioning of parish family life ministers: welcome affirmation both of ministers and of a ministry, the importance of which is only beginning to be understood in the church.

The invitation to work in Leeds came through a comparatively recently convened Committee for Marriage and Family Life, an advisory group to the Episcopal Vicar for Marriage and Family Life, who proposed that a FLM coordinator be employed by the diocese. It was different to be employed rather than be a volunteer in this role. I gained a salary, which was welcome and necessary, but I lost that friendly framework of moral and collaborative support, which characterised the Menevian volunteer working party.

My task in Leeds called for a clarification of vision, a declaration of aims and a formulation of objectives. The establishment of a parent network was recognised as a priority. Alongside this development, a volunteer group of marriage preparation providers agreed to work on production of a diocesan marriage preparation manual, launched in October 2000. Follow-up included the designing and delivery of a training programme for facilitators of marriage preparation and that continues to be delivered as needs arise.

The more urbanised diocese of Leeds made a variety of Inter-Agency and Ecumenical projects possible and these served to promote the pro-active character of Family Life Ministry and the establishment of networks in support of good practice in family life. Many of the Menevian initia-

tives were successfully established in Leeds, including the introduction of an annual diocesan family Mass, incorporating a commissioning of parish FLM volunteers. A public commissioning ceremony signals diocesan intention and commitment and is an important moment in promoting this significant ministry.

Key strengths of family ministry in Menevia were the personal involvement of the Bishop, at all levels of FLM activity; the generous collaboration and creative contribution of the FLM working party; the enthusiasm and commitment of parish and parent volunteers, some of whom continue to be active members in the FLM networks there. In Leeds, strengths include the affirmation of the Bishop, a comprehensive budget, part time field worker and secretary and networks of volunteers, whose commitment and creativity bring the ministry alive, right across this huge diocese.

Lack of financial support would normally be seen as a key weakness in any project. Strange as it may seem, the common bond of voluntary commitment to a cause, deemed vital by FLM working party members and acknowledged as a priority by the Bishop, provided ample impetus to root this ministry in the diocese of Menevia in the early nineties. Initial lack of collaborative and moral support in Leeds, which I found isolating, proved a greater obstacle to defining a diocesan FLM vision and to setting and achieving relevant goals. In both dioceses, a very disappointing aspect was the difficulty of engaging the collaboration of parish priests in the FLM initiative.

My most fulfilling memories from both Leeds and Menevia are linked with the Family Caring Trust parent support programmes, which were the catalyst, in innumerable instances, for raising parent confidence and self-esteem and so strengthening family and, incidentally, community relationships. Who bothers to highlight the vital role of parents in children's relationship education? It was magic to see parents recognise their influence for good in the lives of their children and acknowledge their self worth and the importance of their role as parents.

Experience is a good teacher. There is much to learn from strengths and weaknesses. The significant non-involvement of clergy, for example, serves

to emphasise the fact that ministry to family is essentially a ministry of the laity. What matters here is that the lay community are willing and able to take up the challenge to minister to family life and "become leaders of a new season of hope in the Christian community and the World" (Pope John Paul II - Year of the Family 1994). The role of FLM and of FLM co-ordinators is to promote such willingness and facilitate confident lay leadership for this essential mission.

Sr Anne Conway OSU was FLM co-ordinator for the diocese of Menevia (1993-1995) and for the diocese of Leeds (1996-2002). She is acting Director of Continuing Education at St Angela's College, Lough Gill, Co Sligo, Ireland at present.

#### From Familiaris Consortio (1981)

Therefore, it must be emphasized once more that the pastoral intervention of the church in support of the family is a matter of urgency. Every effort should be made to strengthen and develop pastoral care for the family, which should be treated as a real matter of priority, in the certainty that future evangelisation depends largely on the domestic church (#65)

#### From Redemptoris Missio (1990)

"People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission...The first form of witness is *the very life of the missionary, of the Christian family, and of the ecclesial community*, which reveal a new way of living" (#42)

#### From Novo Millennio Ineunte (2001)

"At a time in history like the present, special attention must also be given to *the pastoral care of the family*, particularly when this fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis." (#47)

The horrific events in Soham, while shocking to all, will have been particularly disturbing to children and their parents, with parents wondering about what to say to their children, how to ensure their children's safety and how to help their children deal with their fears and to make sense of life. One thing families can do, among others, is to value storytelling - reading stories with children and encouraging children to read.

The capacity for stories to help children to make sense of their lives and to assure that that life has order and meaning is well made by William Kilpatrick, Gregory Wolfe and Suzanne M Wolfe in their book *Books that Build Character: A Guide to Teaching your Child Moral Values through Stories* (Touchstone Books 1994). Most of the following is taken directly from their book.

In chapter four they make the point that stories help us to make sense of our lives. As Robert Penn Warren once said: "We turn to fiction for some slight hint about the story in life we live." Stories give us a plot, a purpose and a sense that our struggles and sufferings have meaning. Indeed, the supreme gift of stories is their reassurance that these can be found. By giving us a larger vision a story may help us find meaning in experiences that might otherwise seem chaotic or pointless. Because there are many more things that don't make sense to them, children need this reassurance every bit as much as adults. If you've ever wondered why a child wants to hear the same story over and over, night after night, here is part of the reason.

Of course, the stories we read don't have to be the stories we live. The important thing about good literature, whether it's set in the twenty first century or in the second, is that it opens our eyes to the significance of our own dramas and helps us find continuity and connections we might otherwise miss. This summer I took to rereading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and I was particularly struck to read how Frodo who was feeling overburdened with the responsibility of being the bearer of the ring that could do untold harm, bemoan "I wish it need not have happened in my time." How often have we heard ourselves come out with that line? In

response, Gandalf, the highly esteemed wizard says: "So do I and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is give us." Listening to Gandalf can protect us from the powerlessness of fatalism, while journeying with the hobbits through their many toils can enable us to develop the courage we need to face the real life challenges and difficulties that beset us.

Kilpatrick et al point out that one of the duties adults have toward children is to teach them that the world is not a crazy place. Children need the security of knowing that the world that they live in is an ordered world. How much truer is this in a context where children's sense of order has been horrifically attacked? The authors recommend that children be read stories that are animated by a sense of moral order. What does this mean? In the case of fairy tales, it means that evil is punished, virtue is rewarded, things are set straight, effort pays off and riddles are solved. In novels of course, whether realistic or fantastic, the moral order is not always upheld so decisively and permanently. An outstanding writer crafts a novel in such a way as to draw the reader into a process of discriminating between appearance and reality, since the wrong choices are often dressed up to look like the right ones. Even tragedies assert the reality of a moral order in the face of human failure to live up to that order.

In 1994, when they wrote *Books that Build Character*, the authors would not have heard of *Harry Potter* but it strikes me that J. K. Rowling's novels fit very well with the kind of novels they are promoting in order to give children a sense of order. Having survived his second encounter with Voldemort, who on this occasion was assisted by Hogwarts' Professor Quirrell, Harry asked Professor Dumbledore why Quirrell couldn't harm him. Dumbledore explained:

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realise that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign... to have been loved so deeply even though the person who loved you is

gone, will give us some protection for ever. It is in your very skin. Quirell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

For children who know themselves to be loved and for children who are missing a loving parent through separation or death, such stories can bring order and a sense of security. Of course many children will have read and reread all of the *Harry Potter* novels but one of the blessings of these novels is that they will have given children and parents a sense of the joy and the wonder for reading. Time to read more. *The Narnia Chronicles* by C. S. Lewis perhaps.

In building a sense of order Kilpatrick et al particularly recommend mystery or detective stories citing W. H. Auden who says in *The Guilty Vicarage* that murder mysteries satisfy because they are about order. First you have an ordered and peaceful community. Then you have the crime that disrupts order. And finally, through the intervention of the detective, the restoration of order. Kilpatrick et al go on:

"If adults need reassurance that life makes sense, so do children and young adults. The number of youngsters who are directly affected by acts of senseless violence is still small, but more and more young people are aware of the possibility of sudden and senseless tragedy. They need plenty of help in understanding that, despite the surrounding chaos, there is still purpose, plot and meaning. The mystery story can be a real help in this regard because it shows us that although life is mysterious, it is not meaningless. It is a lucky teenager who discovers that the pleasure of reading Agatha Christie or Patricia Wentworth is not just the pleasure of suspense but also the pleasure of justice and harmony triumphant."

They also recommend to older readers the stories of Ellis Peters, both her medieval mystery series featuring Brother Cadfael, a twelfth century monk, as the detective, and her contemporary stories featuring Inspector Adam Felse. Peters' stories invariably have a strong moral backbone and are full of incident, colourful characters, love interest



and shrewd observations about human nature. There is no shying away from ugliness in her novels, but there is no despair either. The overall theme is always one of hope: good brought out of evil, love out of hate. With *Brother Cadfael* the reader gets to look at life's problems from the aspect of eternity. For today's youngsters, bombarded with daily reports of explosions, fury, abuse and violent death, it is a much-needed perspective.

Kilpatrick, Wolfe and Wolfe have much more to say about the value of reading with children and encouraging children to read. Their central thesis is that good books are essential in enabling children to develop a moral character, a character that can distinguish between right and wrong, with the desire to practice right. They provide practical guidelines for parents who want to read with their children and most importantly they review hundreds of books aimed at younger readers (4 to 8), middle readers (8 to 12) and older readers (12 and up) under the headings: picture books, fables and fairy tales, myths legends and folktales, sacred texts, books for holidays and holy days, historical fiction, contemporary fiction and fantasy and science fiction. For parents who wish to introduce or continue the ritual of bedtime reading, but wonder which books to choose from the many available, asking the local library to stock a copy *Books that Build Character* would be a good place to start.

As for good contemporary books that give a sense of order and that build character, written since 1994 new information is needed. Perhaps *Just Between Us* is a place where regular readers could inform each other of good books they have read or have heard about.

## Book Reviews

Family: A Christian Social Perspective. Lisa Sowle Cahill. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. 0800632524

This book is a response to the question: What is the Christian family? In the first chapter Lisa Sowle Cahill establishes the context for exploring this question by presenting a concise overview of the American debate regarding the role of the family in the renewal of society. One school of thought argues for the promotion of traditional values in family life e.g. responsibility, fidelity and self-sacrifice. This strategy is regarded as the vital antidote for all that threatens healthy family life. The other main school of thought maintains that renewal of society depends on liberation from the traditional patriarchal nuclear family in order to embrace a range of family structures e.g. gay and lesbian people who have adopted children. Throughout the book Cahill shows herself to be sympathetic to this more liberal view.

In chapters 2 and 3 Cahill offers a critical reflection on Catholic and Protestant perspectives of the Christian family. Too often, the author argues, such perspectives have served only to promote patriarchy as the norm and to protect the interests of cultural elites in American society over the centuries. Cahill criticises the Churches for colluding in what she observes to be the dominant American belief system; one that protects itself from accepting some responsibility for the breakdown of family life by demanding that the blame must lie at the door of personal moral weakness in family members. This interpretation of family breakdown ensures that the real issue i.e. redistribution of social assets, remains only on the margins of the social policy agenda.

To respond to the injustice against the family Cahill rightly emphasises the role of the Christian family as a proactive agent in the transformation of society. To emphasise this social aspect of the Christian family's mission Cahill explores in Chapter 4 recent Catholic Church teaching on the family as 'Domestic Church.' As an example of what truly models the domestic church's role in society Cahill then turns in chapter 5 to explore what we can learn from the experience of African American

families. This is a very refreshing chapter that illustrates how oppressed Christian families can often witness to the reign of God more powerfully than privileged families.

Finally in chapter 6 Cahill concludes that the Christian identity of a family is essentially determined by the values it actually promotes e.g. compassion, justice, love etc, rather than a particular family structure. It is surprising to note that nowhere throughout this book does Cahill state clearly that the Catholic Church's teaching on the Christian identity of the family springs from God's vision of marriage. (see *Familiaris Consortio* para 50). Instead Cahill suggests that it might be possible for 'non-traditional' families to be regarded as authentic domestic churches when they exhibit the most important Christian family values. The absence of any argument to support this view leaves this reader unconvinced

Overall this book offers a perceptive and interesting update on current thinking about family welfare policies in America and the role of the Christian family in renewing society.

Fr Michael McGinnity. Director of Family Life Ministry. Diocese of Down & Connor.

### Local Strategic Partnerships

How much do you know about 'Local Strategic Partnerships'? Apparently every Local Authority should have one. One of our readers, Willie Slavin from Whitehaven, Cumbria, has written to tell us his experience with one. "I have been involved in setting up our local one which covers all of West Cumbria. The Voluntary and Community sector has its own forum and I was elected this week to represent the interests of 'families'. These are going to become powerful features of local government. This is the mechanism for Faith Communities to become involved, at the government's request, in local action."

Contact your local authority for more info !

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