



Seeing God in Love With Your Family

A Bethany Family Institute Resource

Parents' Week
Oct 21-27 2002
Theme: Images of Families

Introduction

Everyday, someone in my house lays the table at least once, ready for us all to eat together. It's much the same in your house I suspect, and in millions of households around the world, where families are gifted with sufficient resources. So what's so special, or holy, about that?

Well, plenty, actually. But seeing holiness in any situation depends on the way we look at it. There are three different ways we can do this. We have what we might call the 'eyes of the body', for seeing the surface of reality. These eyes would see a family meal and say that parents and caregivers put food for sharing on the table. The 'eyes of the mind' might see that families are different in what they are able to provide or in what they consider to be delicious food.

But the eyes of faith (sometimes called the eyes of the soul) would perceive the spiritual value of this apparently insignificant event.

These eyes would say that a family meal shows there is love and care for others, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how great or small the feast. These eyes would see the hungry being given food to eat. These eyes would see that parents often do God's work in the world.

We spend a large part of our lives caring for those we live with, taking it all for granted, and assuming that the world outside the home is where real life, and real faith, happens.

This Parents' Week offers us a chance to re-examine our own image of family life and re-evaluate the holiness of our everyday family life. Notice that much is centred on the very simple and very complicated challenge to love. This is the essence of the call made by Pope John

Paul II in 1981:

"Families, become what you are!"

The family, created by and for love

Look around your parish church some Sunday. Families come in all shapes and sizes, don't they? We hope that in each family there is some love. Take consolation from the fact that as a church we understand family simply as a community of life and love (*Eccidium et Spes 48*). This means that all the activities of giving life, whether physical, emotional or spiritual life, intimately connect families with God, the loving, life-giving Creator.

Reflection:

All members of the family,
each according to his or her own gift,
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;
when there is a sharing
of goods, of joys and of sorrows.
(*Familiaris Consortio 23*)

Consider your daily routine. List all the things you do as a parent or spouse. Now read Matthew 25: 31-40. Tick off on your list the things that qualify you for heaven - or rather, make you a true follower of Jesus! When did you feed, water, dress, kiss, listen to, and clean up after any member of your family? Have you ever thought of anger, or lack of self-esteem, as a way of being imprisoned?

Now consider times that your family did all these things for you. When have you been encouraged by care shown to you by your children?

The family as sacrament

A sacrament is a specific human event in which we experience God's abiding love and active presence in ways fully conforming to the way, truth and life revealed through Jesus Christ. Sacramentality is the more general condition of Creation where the Creator remains present and available to human experience through acts of awareness and recognition. "The world is changed with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins). Sacramentality can be found in both the parish and the home.

	Parish Sacraments	Home Sacraments
Baptism	New life in God, incorporation into God's family - the church. Life begun as directed by God's Spirit.	All events involving creativity or newness: new baby, new job, new home, new pets, birthdays.
Confirmation	Deepening of involvement in church community, a more personal acceptance of Christian responsibility, a fuller and more aware witnessing to being Christ's presence in the world.	Growth experiences, accepting new responsibilities, graduations, new school year, entrance into puberty, entering any new phase of life that contains a new identify, acts of witnessing to one's faith etc.
Eucharist	Participation in the primary graced event of the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection through the sharing of his body and blood in the sacred meal of the Mass.	Wherever sharing food with others is commingled with sharing life. Family meals, reunions, effort expended in preparing for meals, cleaning up, all acts that nourish love.
Reconciliation	Celebration of God's forgiving love of us as sinners and reconciliation with God and with those distanced from us through sin.	Expressions of forgiveness between family members, reconnecting after being separated. Rising above human imperfection while maintaining caring relationships.
Anointing of the Sick	Submission to God's healing power of both soul and body, a preparation for the final journey to God after earthly death.	Caring for the sick, especially the frail young or elderly, healing family wounds, overcoming addictions and hurtful behaviour, attending to each other's health of mind and body.
Holy Orders	Ordained to convene, instruct and prepare the Christian community for worship and service. To lead by serving the church and all its members.	Acts transforming chaos into order, providing leadership in the family, ordering, arranging, planning facilitating family events, helping others 'keep on track'.
Christian Marriage	The joining of woman and man into a loving bond for life, the creation of an intimate community where new life is created out of their mutual love.	Expressing love that creates and enhances life, renewal of the marriage relationship through acts of recommitment, creating and deepening friendship, all love of neighbour especially expressed toward those with genuine need.

So, sacramentality is to be found in *any* act of love in your home. How does this vision improve your understanding of what happens in your family life? How does this vision enrich your faith?

The family: the first place we learn about God

If your experience was anything like mine, you left the hospital not only with your new baby, but also with a book that covered all the stages of her development. It was clear from reading this, that my part in encouraging her to walk, talk, eat 'real' food and gradually dispense with nappies was absolutely essential. It's the same way in the world of faith, as this reading explains:

"As a parent, one of your tasks is to bring God's presence into the life experiences of your child. But who is the God you want your child to learn about? What kind of God is your God? Is your God a loving father? Is God a judge? A punisher? A creator? A lawmaker? Whatever your answer, that is the God you will share with your child.

The most important image of God is one we frequently encounter in Scripture and theology. In the First Letter of John (4:8) we read: The man without love has known nothing of God, for God is love.

It does not say 'God loves us enough to bring us into being'. It does not say 'God loves us if we are good'. It does not say 'God is loving'. It says 'God is love'. Therefore, it is love that best teaches children about God." *(Chandler & Burney)*

So, in a very special way, parents are called to *be God's love* for their children. Consider these questions to help you think more about this:

How do you see God yourself? What were you taught about God as a child? How do you feel about God now? What words and tone of voice do you use when talking about God with your children? Look at the list below and circle the qualities that apply to you. When do you demonstrate any of these? How is God's image reflected in you?

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|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Trustworthy | Consistent | Forgiving | Sharing |
| Committed | Joyful | Fun-loving | Charitable |
| Strong | Honest | Truthful | Inventive |

<p>How do parents affect their children's image of God? by Tom McGrath</p>	<p>"God is love". You convey this by being kind and loving to your children.</p>	<p>"God is out to get you". This is conveyed when you constantly find fault with your children.</p>
<p>"God cares for each person with a special care". This message comes across when you stop what you're doing to make time for your children.</p>	<p>"You're not worth God's time or attention" Your children may come to believe this if you're always too busy or preoccupied when they ask questions.</p>	
<p>"God created a universe of goodness and abundance" Your children will learn this if you celebrate as a family and keep an optimistic outlook</p>	<p>"God created a hard world to put us to the test". Your language in general will communicate this if you don't cultivate the belief that God intends good things for his children.</p>	
<p>"Who you are is wonderful in God's eyes". Your children receive this message when you look into their eyes and express your delight with them.</p>	<p>"Who you are is dangerous and needs to be controlled". You convey this when you shame your children for having feelings rather than helping the children recognise, identify and manage those feelings.</p>	
<p>"God is trustworthy". You convey this about God when you make promises to your children and keep them.</p>	<p>"God is unreliable" Your children will learn this about God when they can't rely on you.</p>	

The family at prayer

Prayer is a fancy word for a conversation with God. All good conversation involves listening as well as speaking. God has his own way of speaking to families as Pope John Paul II explains:

"Joys and sorrows,
hopes and disappointments,
births and birthday celebrations,
wedding anniversaries of the parents,
departures, separations and homecomings,
important and far-reaching decisions,
the death of those that are dear
all these mark
God's loving intervention
into the family's history." (FC 59)

Families frequently feel closest to God at these 'transition times'. They can be the most challenging and stressful times of our lives. Yet, these are all part of God's long-term conversation with us, calling us to a new understanding of who he is, through our family life.

Take time this Parents' Week to enjoy your family, to enjoy the loving things you do for them and they for you. Take time to notice God as that love and give thanks. Alleluia. Amen.

Further reading

M. & T. Quinn. I have a million things to do. Family Caring Trust, 2002
Tom McGrath. Raising faith-filled kids. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001
P. Chandler & J. Burney. Sharing the faith with your child. Liguori, 1984
John Paul II. Familiaris Consortio: the Christian family in the modern world. Catholic Truth Society, 1981

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