

Vision for The Christian Family Today

1. Lights and Shadows

I received the gift of life from a mother and father who loved me and I have two sisters whom I love very much. Through them, I am connected to aunts and uncles, cousins, a brother in law and a nephew. It bothers me sometimes that, as a priest, people seem to think that I am not part of a family. I say this because I know that there are probably quite a few other single people here this evening. There are probably others here for whom the experience of family has changed, because a husband or wife has died, or gone away, or because children have grown up and left home to start families of their own. We all belong to families, and that includes people who are in prison, homeless people, missionaries and refugees. Most of us here this evening also belong to God's family, the Church, which Pope Francis describes as a "*family of families*" (AL #87).

With the up-coming World meeting of Families, Pope Francis has invited us in a particular way this year to reflect on what family means to us as individuals and what it means within the community of the Church and of this society in which we live. The family has many faces in society and Pope Francis encourages us, "*to look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows*". (AL #32)

In his letter of encouragement, "The Joy of Love", Pope Francis begins, as he always does, with two reflections. He shares a few thoughts with us on how the family appears in the bible, and then he invites us to take a look at the reality of the family in the world around us.

2. The Family in Scripture

In the Scripture reading we had this evening, St. Paul talks about how every family, spiritual or natural, takes its name from God the Father. At the beginning of the bible we have the story of the first man and woman who are created in the image of God, made to be companions to one another, made of the same stuff. But this is only the beginning. "*The bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises*" (AL #8). We meet Rachel and Tobit and the nameless young couple in the Song of Songs, two couples who were head-over-heels in love. We meet couples like Abraham and Sarah, Hannah and Elkanah, Elizabeth and Zechariah, all of whom struggled with the disappointment of infertility and who, in the maturity of their later years were blessed with children. The bible tells us how, in each case, their experience of God's gift led them to dedicate their child to the service of God.

We meet Jacob and his twelve sons and we follow the story of their jealousy, their estrangement and their eventual reconciliation. We meet a woman in the Book of Maccabees who had seven sons and was ready to lose them all, rather than see them betray their faith in God. The families we meet in the bible are really very ordinary people, who fall in love and get married; who are taken into exile and long for home; who experience sickness, old age and death.

All of the family stories in the Bible point towards the Holy Family of Nazareth. What we see here is a couple who love one another enough to take risks for one another

and whose love endures through homelessness and exile. Jesus is the focus of their life together; they are his protectors and his teachers. He is part of their family, but they also recognise that they must let him be what God wants him to be. They don't own him. Their experience of parenthood is one of loving and letting go and for Mary this involves the painful experience of standing at the foot of the cross.

The story of the family in the bible is the story of all God's people and, in many ways, it is our story too. I would be surprised if you didn't recognise something of your own experience in that mix.

3. The Reality of the Family Today

Pope Francis' second reflection is on the reality of the family today. The essential detail hasn't changed. People are born and grow up in families; they fall in love, marry and have children; they struggle to provide for the needs of their children. When the time comes, they die and are taken back to God.

But Pope Francis invites us to reflect a little more on some of the particular challenges facing families today. Rapid change is a feature of our times and nothing seems permanent. This is reflected in the insecurity that there is in our society around housing and employment.

Migration is another feature which has had a huge impact on humanity and we are no strangers to it here in Ireland. Sometimes it is freely chosen, but often it is the result of unemployment, poverty or, as we have seen in the middle-east, it is one of the effects of war.

People are certainly slower to make commitments today. Pope Francis suggests that relationships are more likely nowadays to be treated like possessions, which we hold onto as long as they are useful and then dispose of. For whatever reason, Western culture today tends towards individualism. The focus, even within families, can often be on what works for me. The abuse of alcohol and other substances is a by-product of this focus on self.

All of this insecurity takes its toll on children.

But Pope Francis is very keen to say that there are many beacons of hope shining in what might otherwise be a dark experience:

- most people still value family relationships
- people still enter in to marriage with the hope of a love that will last
- families who lovingly accept the difficult trial of a child with special needs
- the fact that most families have great respect for the elderly
- the dedication and concern shown towards migrants

"I thank God" he says, "that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way". (AL #57)

4. It is Jesus Who Makes Our Families Christian

If you were to ask me what makes a family Christian, I would say that it begins with what **God** does, not with what **we** do, but. It is about the fact that our lives are touched by Jesus.

Have you ever seen a field full of sunflowers? In the early morning, they are still facing to the West where the sun went down the previous night and they look a little "sad". But as the sun rises, they lift their heads and face East. As the sun "moves" through the heavens, the sunflowers turn, so that they are always getting the best of the sun-light ("girasole" (Italian); "tournesol" (French)). I think "making our families Christian" is like that. First we are touched and awakened by the light of God's love. Then we respond by following where that love leads us.

As a child, I thought my parents were perfect. I'm not saying that I always agreed with them, but they were the nearest thing in my world to God. (They knew all the answers; they made all the rules; they provided all the goodies and they healed all the hurts). Looking at it now, I realise what a huge pressure that must be on parents. (It's like being a bishop). I found it hard to believe that my parents would sometimes argue about things. I worried that, maybe they didn't love one another anymore. Later, I came to realise that parents are only human; they don't always get it right. The important thing was that they never gave up trying.

When I was already in my forties, my sister and I invited our parents to come for a holiday in Blacksod, County Mayo. While they didn't want to drive all the way there, they decided it would be good to have their own car with them, so my sister drove them down. One day, we went to visit the Céide Fields, about an hour away. They decided to bring their own car and take their time. We travelled separately. By the time they got to Céide Fields they are very tense and cool with one another. My mother wasn't impressed with the way my father handled the S-bends on the cliff road.

That evening, as usual, we celebrated Mass in the house. As it turned out, the reading was from St. Paul, "*Love is patient; love is kind...*" and so on. I decided it might be better not to say anything, but the sign of peace was really wonderful. The love of God has the power to bring our own love to life and I think that is almost certainly the most important ingredient in the life of the Christian family today.

Pope Francis devotes more than twenty pages of "*Amoris Laetitia*" to reflecting on this hymn to love from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. If you are married, or preparing for marriage, you could do worse than take a half an hour even once a week, to read one short section of that reflection and talk through it together.

Let me share with you just two short thoughts from that long reflection. Where St. Paul says: "*Love rejoices with others*", Francis comments: "*The family must be a place where, when something good happens to one of its members, they know that others will be there to celebrate it with them*". That is the opposite of individualism.

Where St. Paul says: "*Love forgives*", Francis says: "*Something is wrong when we see every problem as equally serious; in this way we risk being unduly harsh with the failings of others. The desire to see our rights respected turns into thirst for vengeance rather than a reasoned defence of our dignity*".

It is the gift of self that puts the joy into marriage. That doesn't mean that anybody is called to be a "doormat", but where the focus is all on me and my agenda and my fulfilment, there is no room for the joy to enter in.

5. Forming Christian Families Through Marriage

Many families in our society are not founded on marriage and, of those which are, many are founded on a civil marriage. That is not to say that they are bad families. The Church believes in marriage both as a primary human relationship and as a Christian vocation. Stable committed marriages, bring stability to the family and ultimately to the whole of society. In the midst of all the complexity of relationship, the Church continues with confidence to propose a model of family life which is founded on the Sacrament of Marriage.

Married people are the ministers to one another of the Sacrament of Marriage. But Marriage is not something entirely private to the couple and their immediate family. The priest or deacon witnesses the consent of the couple on behalf of the Church. In this way, we express our belief that the Sacrament of Marriage is essentially related to the life of the faith community.

The future of the Church depends to a great extent on the Christian family. If there is a vocations crisis today, it is a crisis of confidence and a crisis of faith and it impacts on the vocation of Christian marriage, not just on priesthood and religious life. Of course people are still falling in love and getting married. But there is a difference between "getting a blessing" and seeing your love for one another as your Christian vocation. This love, in all its concrete reality, (picking up the socks, paying the bills, tucking the children in at night, holding hands – and more); this is how you become signs of the love of Christ - and it is not just about you as a couple – it spills over to touch the lives of the people around you.

Pope Francis reminds us that preparation for marriage and pastoral support for marriage and the family are the responsibility of the whole Church. One of the things that surfaced in the consultation before the recent Synod of Bishops was the need for more attention to be given to preparation for marriage. Pre-marriage courses are important, but preparation for marriage begins the day we are born. Pope Francis says that: "*those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision*" (AL #208). Marriage preparation is not limited to learning about budgeting or psychology or fertility, it is about growing into the kind of love that St Paul speaks about. It happens over time.

Pope Francis often speaks about what he calls the graduality of love:

"there is no need to lay upon two limited people the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and the Church, for marriage as a sign entails "a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God".

In other words, you have to be patient with yourself and with one another.

6. Supporting the Family in living as a Christian Family

I think we need to be aware that, in a society which is more individualistic and also less religious than it was, the structures that supported community are not as strong as they were in the past. In the past, perhaps, there were too many nosey-parkers around. Today the reverse is true. Everybody minds his or her own business. That may have its advantages, but it means that couples probably receive less support from their community they did in other generations. The question for us as Church is how we can

help couples “to enrich and deepen their conscious and free decision to have, hold and love one another for life” (AL #218)? How can we make best use of moments such as First Communion and Confirmation to help young parents to rediscover the beauty and the promise of their own commitment?

Pope Francis says things, at times, which people sometimes find difficult or even disturbing. We have been used to seeing everything in black and white. Francis is quite clear that the truth is the truth and, in that sense there is black and white. But life is not as simple as that; it is a journey that we are on. It is a feature of our times that many families are not founded on marriage. The Church has to propose the full ideal of marriage as God intended it. To do otherwise would be to fail all those who are trying to live that ideal. But Pope Francis argues that, rather than cutting people off who haven’t reached the ideal, the mission of the Church is to meet them where they are, in the hope of helping them to complete the journey.

“It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy” (AL #295)

7. The Mission of the Christian Family in the Modern World

When we talk about the Christian family today, it is not enough to talk about how we can support the Christian family in isolation. The Synod of Bishops in 2014 was about *the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the world*. The Church, as a family of families, is called to support and encourage families in exercising their mission. I want to explore very briefly with you some of the key elements of that mission and the challenges which they present for the Christian family today.

a. The gift of life

Pope Francis describes the family as “*the setting in which a new child is not only born but also welcomed as a gift of God*”. (AL #166). He talks about how children are loved before they have done anything to deserve it, just as we are loved by God. One of my favourite passages in *Amoris Laetitia* is the one in which Francis reminds parents that “*the gift of a new child, entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life.... “God allows parents to choose the name by which he himself will call their child for all eternity”* (AL #166)

The family is “*the sanctuary of life*” and it is part of the mission of every Christian family to bear witness to the immense worth of each child as a son or daughter of God. Our support and compassion for parents who face particular challenges must never allow the family to be turned into a place “*where life is rejected and destroyed*”.

b. The Education of Children

Article 42 of *Bunreacht na hEireann* reads as follows:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.”

The family is not there to help the school; the school is there to help the family.

Pope Francis suggests that it is more important for parents *"to start processes than to dominate spaces"*, helping children to *"grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy"*. *"The questions I would put to parents"* he says *"are these: 'Do we seek to understand where our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?'"*

Parents sometimes wonder *"how can we share our faith with our children, when we are only struggling with it ourselves?"* I understand this. I often feel the same when I get up to preach the Word of God on a Sunday morning. We are all on the same journey. We grow in our faith by sharing it.

If Jesus is spoken about in your home; if there are pictures or books about his life that the children can identify with; if there is a prayer at mealtimes and at night before sleep, then Jesus will be part of the family circle. With a child's imagination, prayer is not "rocket science"; and even if it were, rocket science is no problem for children these days. Perhaps we adults make it difficult for ourselves when we take ourselves too seriously. Unfortunately, as we grow to adulthood, we sometimes lose our sense of mystery, our capacity to be amazed.

Some years ago, I chatted individually with each of the children preparing for confirmation in my parish. I asked them, among other things, what they would like their parents to do to help them prepare. The answers were very interesting. There were three things that kept coming up again and again. My parents could help me by *"teaching me my prayers"*, by *"bringing me to Mass"* and by *"telling me about their own Confirmation"*. It seems so little, and yet it would mean so much.

I see no reason why Christian families should not insist on quality religious education for their children at school. Obviously we also need to be inclusive and respectful of the needs of parents of other traditions. One thing is sure, however; if you don't speak for yourselves, nobody in government is going to pay any heed to the likes of me or Bishop Ray.

c. The care of the sick

It is in the family that we expect to be nourished, to find shelter and to be affirmed. In much the same way it is first and foremost in the family that we are cared for when we are sick. Even when 'specialised' care is required, the family can exercise a unique mission in being close to the sick person. The family can serve as an advocate, especially when the strange surroundings of hospital, or the sick-person's own incapacity, make him or her more vulnerable. It is in situations such as this, especially when sick people are cared for at home for long periods of time, that families can also become good neighbours to other families under pressure.

I think it is particularly important that family members don't neglect the spiritual needs of sick family members. It would be sad if sick or elderly people were to be deprived of the sacraments of the Church, simply because they lack mobility. If they can't go to the Church, the Church will come to them. You only have to ask.

d. The care of the elderly

In the course of my parish visitation over the past couple of years, I have met many elderly couples in their homes, whose children have long since grown up and started families of their own. They look forward to visits from their grand-children after school, but most of all they seem to be content to be back where they started, just

the two of them, sharing their lives together. We have a lovely tradition in the Diocese, once a year, of gathering together to celebrate with those couples who are marking the different jubilees of their marriage.

In his letter "*Amoris Laetitia*", Pope Francis captures this in a beautiful passage in which he compares the love of old age to *wine that has been allowed to mature over time*. (AL #231)

Old age can be a lonely time and a vulnerable time and it is part of the mission of the Christian family to ensure that elderly are cared for, emotionally as well as materially. They are the ones who have built up our families and our society, before we appeared on the scene. Pope Francis says:

Listening to the elderly tell their stories is good for children and young people; it makes them feel connected to the living history of their families, their neighbourhoods and their country. A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents, who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future. "A society that has no room for the elderly or discards them because they create problems, has a deadly virus"; "it is torn from its roots".

All of these elements of the mission of the Christian family begin in our own homes, but families are also called to extend that care to other families that may, even temporarily, lack the energy or the resources to respond to their own needs.

This brings me to one other aspect of the mission of the family.

e. Care for the Poor

One of the most inspiring things about the first Christian community in Jerusalem was that nobody was in need. St Luke tells us:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Lk 2:42ff)

Many families live in poverty in our society today. While this poverty sometimes comes as a result of unwise decisions or addiction, it can also be the result of circumstances beyond their control, and it almost always affect children more than anyone else. Sharing what we have with the needy is one of the best ways of giving thanks to God for his blessings. It is probably also one of the best lessons that we can teach our children, not only in word but also in action.

I'm sure there are many other things I might have said, but perhaps I have already said more than enough. Let me finish simply by making for you the prayer that we heard earlier from Saint Paul.

Out of his infinite glory, may God the Father give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith and then, planted in love and built on love, you will have strength to grasp the breadth and the strength, the height and the depth, until knowing

the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God”