

THE MISSION OF THE FAMILY

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THIS ARTICLE addresses the 'mission' of the family not the 'ministry' of the family. Mission is not the same as ministry. Jesus' mission was to proclaim the good news of the kingdom by inviting people to intimacy with his Father through belief in him. His ministry was to meet the needs of the people who came to him, the blind, lame, deaf and poor. He was much more than a wonder-worker. In fact, his miracles pointed the people 'who had ears to hear and eyes to see' towards belief in him and the kingdom. He invited and empowered them to experience the fullness of life.

What is mission?

Both mission and ministry are absolutely essential for the well-being of the Body of Christ and its purposes both within and outside the community of faith. For us today, mission is the direct proclamation of the gospel, drawing people to share in the life of the eucharistic community. Ministry focuses on meeting the material, psychological, physical and spiritual needs of people. Mission concerns itself with Jesus's commission to make disciples of all nations, ministry is concerned with providing what is lacking in people's lives. Mission requires a personal investment, a personal relationship with people to reveal to them the presence of God in their midst. Ministry does not require the same level of personal investment nor the establishment of relationship with those ministered to. Non-Christians can do the very same things christian ministers can do, such as feed the poor, but cannot duplicate the work of mission, which flows directly from a life of intimacy with Jesus in the community of faith. Our focus here is the mission of family.

Basis of family mission

When we speak of the mission of the family we are speaking of something unique to family. No individual person or group of persons can carry on the work of mission in the Church in the same way as the family. In fact, the family is uniquely equipped for mission and serves as a model for all mission efforts in the Church.

Essential to our understanding of family for mission is the sacrament of matrimony. The heart of the family is the sacramental couple who see their marriage as a vocation of the Church for the sake of the Church. They are open to new life and have been fruitful in children.

The couple

The basis of family mission must begin with the couple themselves. A married couple are not just friends choosing to live together; not just partners who share life. They are called to a unity of intimacy and belonging to one another unparelled in human relationships. That relationship most closely approaches the unity of intimacy Christ has with the Church. The love between husband and wife calls for so much more than doing good things for one another. The goal is not peaceful co-existence but unity. Even so, their unity is not merely for their own joy; it is also for the sake of the Church.

When a catholic couple marry in the Church, they become a new reality — a sacrament. The couple themselves become a sign of one of the seven unique channels of redemptive grace brought forth in the Church by Christ himself. The sacrament of matrimony is not a ritual celebrated on the wedding day. The couple in their love for each other, living in and for the Church, are themselves the sacramental sign of matrimony.

The basis of mission for the family begins with the love relationship the sacramental couple have with each other as well as their couple relationship with the Church, the people of God. Their devotion to one another and their resultant way of life of tenderness and complete belonging form the underpinnings of their mission to the Church. 'Coupleness' is critical to their sign value as a sacrament for the Church.

At the heart of 'coupleness' is their sexual intimacy, which is bound to affect the quality of mission for the family. The sexual dimension of the couple's relationship is not only another part of their life experience. It also sets the tone of their relationship and life together which pervades their whole awareness. In fact, the sexual intimacy of the spouses is so powerful and overwhelming that, to a certain degree, it is 'foreign' to the person living a single way of life. The totality of their immersion in one another is the greatest gift they, as a couple, can bring to the Church.

We are not talking solely about sexual intercourse here, but especially about their sexual desire for one another, which cannot be hidden by a couple in love. Teilhard de Chardin has said, 'Sexual passion serves Christ. It is a redeeming act as well as a creative one'.

When a couple are sexually aware, they make present in their lives and to the Church the God who is love. Therefore, the sexual dimension of the couple's life is not a private affair for them alone, it is also for the welfare of the Church. It provides an atmosphere of love, creative and redemptive in the Body of Christ.

The children

Integral to the mission of the family are the children born of the sacramental couple, because they are the incarnation of the couple's love, a memorial to their love. Parenthood is a derivative role, flowing from the love of a wife for her husband and a husband for his wife. Only secondarily should parenthood flow from the desire for children. The most compelling reason a couple can have for giving new life is their love for each other.

Family mission cannot be based on the good deeds members of the family do for one another. Meeting needs is not enough. Family mission requires the members of the family, parents and children, to be living in relationship with one another. What makes a family attractive is the quality of relationship they have. Their experience of and presence to one another are vital to their mission. In a family mission rather than just a mission by people who happen to be members of the same family, their very 'familiness' must be offered. This is true even when individual family members are involved in Church life. They bring more than skills, talents, or even personal compassion. They bring relationship with their whole family. They speak and make present the care and compassion of their whole family.

Finally, family mission operates most effectively in terms of its 'familiness' in the homes and neighbourhoods where the family experiences life from day to day. This home environment is especially significant because it expresses the values and beliefs of the people who live there; what this couple and family are really like. The very walls 'speak' the people who live there. To expect family mission to be beneficial in proclaiming the values of the kingdom from any other context, especially the context of the institutional Church, detracts from this beautiful part of family testimony.

The mission of the family

The primary mission of the family is to reveal the Church to itself. This is not accomplished by providing services to the Church as a family: that would be family ministry. Rather, it comes about by living out in the midst of the Church the meaning of family, not just as model but also as a leaven, to call the people of the Church to live as the family of God.

Chosen people

Family members are a chosen people. The beauty of the spousal experience is the realization each has of being selected. Being chosen is not earned, but a pure gift born of love. Knowing this gives to husband and wife a special dignity and sense of self-worth that they cannot deny. Being chosen is very humbling because it means each spouse receives dignity from the other and not from self. It is not a reward but a gift.

We of the Church must learn from this, coming to grips with the fact that we are a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims to be his own' . . . (1 Pet 2,9). Unless we believe we are chosen by God, we will never really live as the family of God. Out of his providential love we have been chosen to be his people. We are no more ordinary in God's eyes than a wife is just another woman to her husband. As she assumes the goodness and love of her husband, we must assume the goodness and love of those who, in God's name, chose us to belong to the Church. When we lose sight of this, we also lose sight of our dignity and worth. When we remember we have been specially chosen by God we will never see ourselves as just ordinary persons. Our sense of worth comes from the one who chose us, not ourselves. This should humble us. While not better than others, we are different. We are the chosen of God.

A people

We are chosen to be a people. God did not choose individuals to belong to him in isolation from other chosen ones, but to belong to one another, to have an identity as a people. Just as father, mother, son and daughter find their identity in terms of their relationship with one another, so too are the members of the family of God. As the members of a family are called to be a communion of people, so also are the people of the Church. We are called to the love of belonging in the Church. For instance, the issue is not 'Do I love the Church?' but rather, 'Do I love my fellow Catholics?' As a family we must become immersed in each other's lives. Through them we find our meaning, identity and joy in life. Our communion with God involves our communion with one another (Jn 17,21).

Sacramental couples are extraordinarily equipped to call us to this unity. They belong to one another out of their mutual choice of the other in love, and they call the faithful to belong to one another. Consequently, our identity as Catholics is not so much defined by our dogmas, laws, or rituals, but by our belonging in love. The issue is not how well we keep the faith, but how well we keep the faithful. Our love must reach beyond personal preferences and attraction. The fundamental claim a sister has to a brother's love is that she is

his sister. Every person in the Church has this same claim on every other Catholic for the very same reason. If we believe Jesus commanded us to love one another as he loved us, we can exclude no one.

Life-giving

The family carries out its mission to reveal the Church to itself by its ambition for new life. True love is creative, diffusive of itself. It cannot remain static or it becomes inward, self-seeking and ultimately exploitative.

A sacramental couple with a passionate, selfless love for one another cannot keep that love to themselves. They give themselves completely and absolutely to one another, to create through the power of their love a real human being who will testify forever that they love each other that much. In other words, the decision to have children is not parental, but definitely marital, both because it calls for marital stability in order to exercise this tremendous sexual power with its lifelong consequences, and in that a wife should want to empower her husband to be a father even more than to fulfil her desire to be a mother. A husband should want to gift his wife and make her more than she could ever be by herself.

The primary reason to have children is not their desire for children, which may be strong, but their desire for each other. When a child is wanted as a separate entity from his parents' relationship, the child cannot help but be exploited. He will be expected to fulfil his parent's reason for granting him life; a possession to fulfil their needs. The popular rallying cry, 'every child should be wanted' misses the point entirely. Every husband must be wanted by his wife; and every wife by her husband. Where this desire is strong, even the unexpected pregnancy will become a wanted child.

This idea is critical to our appreciation of parenthood since the couples' love for one another continues the creation of the children born to them or adopted by them. By the stability of their marital-love relationship, they not only give life, but in abundance. They form the spirit of the home environment in which their children will mature to adulthood. The gospel understanding of love as other-centered and open to life will not be foreign.

Love in the Church must also be creative and diffusive. When there is no real sense of inviting people to join us, it is because we do not have any real ambition to add life to our faith family. We cannot settle for simply improving the quality of life we already have, for we will become inward, self-seeking and, ultimately, exploitative. That would be like the couple who want merely to maintain the love they already have. Such a posture guarantees its failure and love in the Church will eventually ebb.

A family's openness to new life urges the Church to share the largess of Almighty God in our lives. We cannot wait for people to approach us. We should seek converts in exactly the way in which a couple should desire children. They should not be sought in themselves. Members of the Church should be the fulness of all that they possibly can be towards one another. This will determine their capacity to bring forth life in, with and through one another.

Our motive for bringing new members into the Body of Christ is not to add numbers, to convince other people ours is the 'right' religion, or even to do good for others. It is to offer the gift of new life to the rest of the faithful. We have so much that we cannot keep it to ourselves. We want people to experience our love and to share life with those with whom we are closest. We want the world to know our life is so fulfilling and satisfying that we need to share it and bring others to the fulness of the life which is ours. We do this by offering them baptism and our communion with one another in Jesus through the Eucharist. We offer them, not just the faith, but also the faithful.

We of the Church must belong to one another and so love one another that new converts will experience their worth in our eyes because we offered them the gift of sharing in our community of love. We desire to bring others to life in our midst, to testify eternally that our love for one another in the community has been so magnificent.

Healing and reconciliation

Closely related to the family's openness to new life is healing and reconciliation, another facet of its mission to reveal the Church to itself. Family unity requires family members to live a redemptive way of life. Redemption is an on-going process whereby family members apply the fruits of the cross to their daily lives with each other. Couples show the way with their extraordinary willingness to forgive and be reconciled with one another. By this, they respond to the call of Christ to be one; they embrace Jesus present in their relationship as their Lord and Saviour.

A couple cannot ignore nor mask their sinfulness, nor can they pretend hurts never happened. They need to restore their relationship with God and each other. Whatever may have caused their hurt, they know their relationship is more important. They can live with differences, but not indifference. They need one another. Forgiveness and reconciliation are critical to their unity. By proclaiming their need for a saviour in their lives, they proclaim the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation as well.

This forgiving family then calls the whole Church to recognize it is

to be a forgiving people. The Church is not spotless and stainless. We are in need of a saviour. This, however, must not blind us to our goodness and beauty, nor diminish our commitment to one another in the Church. As with the couple, we have a constant call to forgive and embrace one another in the Lord. Since our call as a people is also to unity, we cannot allow differences to divide us. The most important issue is our belonging in love, '... so the world may believe' (Jn 17,21).

This does not mean ignoring real hurts nor pretending we are above such things. It means facing our sins honestly, but responding to the sinner lovingly. As long as we hug our hurts, we cannot hug one another. Forgiveness cannot be earned or awarded, it is always offered as a gift so that our relationship can be restored. Even our passion for justice and concern for the poor ring hollow unless we, the community of believers, proclaim as well the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation by our way of life with each other. Only this can lead us to the joy of intimacy; only then can we, the Church, be as attractive as a couple in love.

Atmosphere of exultation

Liberation of the family as a force for renewal in the Church requires creating an atmosphere in the Church for reconciliation and exultation.

As the married couple set the tone of this in the family, the family sets the tone for the Church. When the gospel speaks of there being more joy in Heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine with no need of repentance, it clarifies the idea. Repentance, turning away from sin and back to our people, is only one part of the healing process. That person must be received with great exultation and enthusiasm also.

For the couple there is no exultation like the sexual. They are to have a personal sexual delight in and desire for the other. When this is present in their relationship, there is no room for indifference, dullness or routine. They are excited about one another again after a hurt had distanced them. Sexual intercourse is the highest expression of their exultation and unity, as long as it truly expresses their joy in one another.

Healing in the family requires more than amnesty. It requires a reaching out to the one repentant; a holding, embracing in love. They exult in one another again, so they can be about their way of life of communion. For there to be nothing negative between family members is not enough. There must be something positive happening or the joy God has desired for us will be absent.

One basic problem in the Church today is our lack of enthusiasm

for one another. We are so dull together, with little sense of delight in our belonging to one another as Catholics. While we have been so well trained to be good Catholics by doing what Catholics do we have missed being involved with one another, like the couple married twenty-five years who have accepted settling down as norm and expectation. They are not excited about each other. They show it. So do we in the Church.

This is the most common sin of infidelity. A husband is unfaithful to his wife when he treats her like any other good woman. This does not have to involve adultery, it means just treating her as though she were not truly special to him. He may be a good man, but he must change to be a good husband. The same is true for Catholics. We have to change our attitude toward one another. Our mutual love and enthusiasm in the Body of Christ must become our way of life.

Spirituality

Finally, the family reveals the very spirituality at the heart of Church. It does not centre on any one person of the Trinity, but the Trinity itself in its unity. Family spirituality is trinitarian for the family way of life is one of relationship: each individual person remains distinct, but finds his or her identity through, with and in the other family members. Their view of life comes from the context of their relationship.

Jesus came to reveal the Father. In knowing Jesus we know the Father. The Holy Spirit, while a distinct person, does not exist independently from the Father and Son, or from the love between them. The very identity of God involves relationship. So does the very identity of the family. Family spirituality must grow out of and express this relationship of persons. As the presence of the persons of the Trinity to one another and of the members of the family to one another provide the context for their life activities, so too must the presence of the members of the Church to one another be the basis of their life's activities and their spirituality.

Our spirituality as a Church, then, is not a matter of the members being good persons, but our being members of one another; our mutual belonging. We must see our actions as affecting the life of the Body of Christ. While a personal relationship with Jesus is a commendable goal, it cannot be seen as a private affair. It will be incomplete unless it includes a relationship with his Body, the Church.

A mission whose time has come

This mission of family, to reveal the Church to itself, is not a matter of romantic invention. Both the parish community and

Church universal are spoken of in terms of 'family' as never before. However, calling a parish a family does not make it one. It will require much more than an intellectual nod in the direction of family to transform our parishes and the Church into a communion of people. In fact, the mission of the family is doomed to frustration and failure as long as the environment in the Church thwarts the liberation of the family as a force for renewal in the Church.

Need for sacrament of matrimony

The liberation of the family begins by acknowledging the sacrament of matrimony's rightful place in the treasure of the Church. This sacrament does not exist apart from the married couple any more than baptism exists apart from the baptized. Our sacramental couples deserve to be revered as living signs of God's urgent call that we of the Church live a relationship of selfless love with one another. The couple's call to 'defer to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Ephes 5,21), points to the gospel call to all who follow Christ; 'Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest' (Mk 11,43).

This gospel is incompatible with the 'gospel of self-fulfilment' proclaimed today. While people of influence in the Church champion the values of independence and personalism above those of belonging and self-giving, the values vital to family will be rejected or ignored. Unfortunately, an individualistic orientation provides the vision behind almost all decisions made in the Church today. This is the domain of the clergy, religious, and professional laity. There is no place for married couples as married couples at this level of church life. To test this startling statement, we need only ask, who makes the decisions in our parish or diocese? Decisions in the Church on all levels are made by single persons. We need to include sacramental couples in the decision-making process.

To say the Church supports family and parents does not mean couples feel supported or believed in. They need to be recognized as leaders in the Church with a significant place in the decision-making process. Their role as leaders is not to represent other married couples, but to witness and speak to the values of relationship in all areas of church life and renewal. After all, the gospel is a call to relationship, to intimacy, to communion with one another in Christ, not to self-fulfilment apart from community. Couples can proclaim by the flesh and blood of their lives that 'in giving we receive . . . in dying we are born to eternal life' (St Francis).

Change will require more than just tacking couples onto the present system. The whole process must change to recognize their

gifts. We have attempted this for the women of the Church. We know more, much more, is needed. The same principle is at work for couples. Tokenism is not enough. In fact, it would not work because the couple would have to sacrifice their current life-style. They are not equipped to respond to needs people have, to help them out of trouble as singles are. Their orientation is toward sharing, drawing others into belonging, and the building of relationships. If a single person could proclaim the gospel in the same way as a couple does through the sacrament of matrimony, there would be no need for the sacrament of matrimony. It would be only as a private sacrament between the husband and wife with nothing to say to the Church. It takes a couple to proclaim the gospel through matrimony. We must free our couples to do so. They have a message to speak to the whole Church.

Need for ecclesial awareness

The liberation of the family requires helping the couple to realize they are meant by God to be more than a good couple and their family more than a good humanistic family. They are to be consciously and overtly for the Lord. They need to know the baptism of their children is not only a matter of personal holiness for the child and the discharging of a parental duty. They should be saying to all the faithful of the Church: 'This child is not just ours anymore, he is also yours. We pledge that we will make you, his chosen people, so present in our home that our child will grow in love for you over the years of life with us'. Parents cannot be satisfied with exposing their children to the faith; they need also exposure to the faithful.

Family or private spirituality?

The liberation of the family also has consequences for family spirituality. Again, the way is uphill. The influence of the individualistic mentality makes itself felt even here. Family spirituality is not the sum total of the private relationships each has with God. Holiness is not really a private affair. It flows from the love between the family members. When God graces a wife, it is for her husband too. A husband's holiness is for his wife's well being, not only his. A couple's holiness is for their children. We have to help spouses share the graces the Lord pours into them.

When they approach their spiritual lives as solitary journeys, the sacrament of matrimony has not been integrated into the life of the Church. God does not deal with us solely as individuals, a popular attitude in the Church today, but also with us as people. Sadly, we are not surprised when one spouse is devout and the other not; or

even when one flees to God as a replacement for the beloved. However, God does not wish to be divisive with a couple. He wants to integrate them so that as he embraces each, they will embrace one another more closely. Only when couples recognize this can they be about their mission to bring the family of God closer also.

Church as community

The liberation of the family means the Church must be open to see itself as a community of people and not primarily as an institution. While our orientation is institutional and our concerns centre on being right, then issues are more important than people, whether in matters of theology, ethics, social justice or liturgy. How well we are living up to God's plan for us, as an ecclesial community, is determined by how much we love one another. Only when this becomes our first priority can we appreciate the meaning of family and grasp its vital mission to the Church.

Individual members of a family may be very fine and admirable, but if fighting, indifferent or cold toward one another, their home is unattractive. Similarly, the goodness, holiness or brilliance of individual members of the Church does not make the Church what Jesus envisioned. The Church will be as attractive to those outside as the warmth we establish with one another in the name of the Lord. 'Love one another as I have loved you'. John means Jesus wants us to experience unity with one another for his sake, 'so the world may believe you sent me' (Jn 17,21). Jesus put his credibility in our hands. They are empty until we hold one another.

If we are perceived as nothing special, we lack what people search for, what the gospel is primarily about: community. Jesus did not leave us a creed, a scripture or a dogma. He left us a people. Insofar as we are in communion with these people, we have Jesus in our life. This makes us attractive. Centuries ago, non-believers looked at the Church and remarked, 'See how they love one another'. Non-believers today deserve the same opportunity. Without love, whatever else we do, no matter how laudable, will have the ring of 'sounding brass' and profit us nothing.

Renewal in the Church is not to be confused with developments in dogma and scripture, reformation of liturgical practices or updating of church law. Renewal is the work of the Spirit who dwells in us all. To be open to the Spirit, we must be open to one another. Renewal will have come to the Church when we say, 'I love my fellow Catholics', and mean by that, 'I love the Catholic Church'.

When we have a deep and intimate relationship with Catholics, we will not just live up to Catholicism, but to our brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church. Then we will be a family!