

# Family:

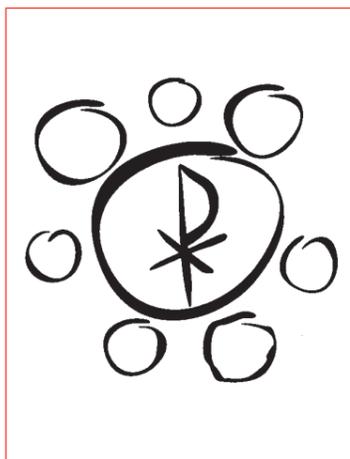
## *the first and vital cell of society*

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

### Symbols in the home

#### The family meal

Family meals are a powerful symbol of the Church-in-miniature gathered around a table. The table provides a sacred place. It is around a table that families most commonly pray. It is a spiritual centre for the family: a place where stories are told, where hopes, dreams and grief are shared.



The family meal is a symbol of the Eucharist. The word 'Eucharist' means 'thanks-giving'. The gathering around a table, the gift of food, the listening to one another's stories, dreams and grief are all reasons for giving thanks.

#### Family photographs

Looking through old photo albums is one way families hand on the tradition of family stories and memories. In centuries gone by, stories and memories were handed on by word of mouth. In our time we are fortunate to have visual images to pass down to the next generation.

#### Gifts and gift-giving

Some of our most precious family moments are the times we have given small gifts to one another. The child's drawing on the fridge, the flowers given from the garden, the birthday gifts and souvenirs - seemingly insignificant gifts and gestures - can symbolise our deep connections with one another.

#### The quiet place

Every family needs a quiet place. This might be a corner of the garden, or a room in the house, where one can go to get away from it all. In that quiet place we are able to gather our thoughts and find time to notice God in our lives.

#### Symbols of time

The family calendar marks anniversaries, special events, holidays and family commitments. It is a symbol of the way we organise our lives together.

#### Symbols of our faith

In the family home there is often a collection of symbols which link us to the wider church family. Such symbols might be baptismal candles, icons, palms, crucifixes and copies of prayers which we like to reflect on. These symbols remind us that we are part of the long and rich history of Christianity. They make tangible our identity as members of a Christian community.

### Families teach us so much

*'Thanks to love within the family, the Church can and ought to take on a more homelike or family dimension, developing a more human and fraternal style of relationships' (FC, 64).*

- What lessons from family life can we apply to the way our parish/diocese operates?

*'For those who have no natural family the doors of the great family which is the Church...must be opened even wider. No one is without a family in this world: the Church is a home and family for everyone...' (FC, 85).*

- If we are the Church, then the credibility of this statement rests on the hospitality of our own hearts and homes. How has your (a) family (b) parish offered somebody 'a place to call home'?

### Home is a Holy Place

This resource has been published as part of the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales 2007 initiative called Home is a Holy Place. This is the second phase of the response to Listening 2004 following Everybody's Welcome. Home is a Holy Place aims to develop greater awareness and understanding of the graced, blessed and holy reality of Christian marriage and family life.

*"A broader understanding of marital and family spirituality among both clergy and laity will be fundamental to the success of any future work by the church in support of family life." (Not Easy but Full of Meaning #201)*

Further information is available online at [www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk](http://www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk)

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Additional material contributed by the Home is a Holy Place Working Group. The report on Listening 2004 entitled Not Easy But Full of Meaning can be found online at [www.catholic-ew.org.uk](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk)

# Family: an adventure in love



### One night...

*'When our baby daughter was very sick, her ear infection made it too painful for her to lie down in her cot. My husband sat up all night cradling her feverish little body in his arms so that she and I could both sleep. This incident has given me an image of God's love which I will treasure always.'* (Fran)

### A vision of love

(FC, 11-16)

What is family all about? In *Familiaris Consortio* John Paul II took us right back to basics: God is love. How simple that sounds - and yet there is nothing more fundamental to human existence. Created in God's image, each person is called into being through love and for love.

The Church identifies marriage as one clear way in which people live out their vocation to love. In marriage husband and wife say to each other: 'I love and accept you as you are'. They make a free gift of themselves and so reflect the self-giving love of Christ. Spouses seek a deeply personal unity of heart, body and soul.



It is this self-giving union between man and woman and the new life generated, emotionally, spiritually and physically, which makes marriage the foundation of the wider family community, the Church and society.

### Families on mission

Put simply, the mission of the family is to BE what it IS: 'an intimate communion of life and love' (FC, 17). Without love, the family is simply not a community. *Familiaris Consortio* identifies four ways in which the Church depends on families:

#### 1. Families form community

(FC, 18-27)

'Love one another' is the gospel commandment at the heart of family life. If the world is to be a place of self-giving love, then it has to start with the tiniest cell of human loving: the married couple, the family.

Through countless everyday caring actions in the lives of spouses, parents, children, extended family, neighbours and friends, the family is a source of hope in the world at large. From the life-giving presence of a newborn child to the wisdom of an elderly grandparent, 'all members... 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; where there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows' (FC, 21).

Okay. We all admit it. Family life is difficult. What family does not know the tension of a personality clash, the heartache of tragedy, the dull pain of daily irritations? Not to mention the juggling of millions of demands, the balancing act of home and work life and the never quite getting to the end of the to-do list.

Family life is a challenge because the stakes are so high. Which other relationships can hold out so much promise: a life-long sense of belonging, a rare depth of intimacy, the shelter of each other's arms?

Family life is indeed a risky adventure in love: a relational experience at the core of human existence with the power to make or break not only individuals, but society itself.

This leaflet looks at family life from a Christian perspective. It is based on themes found in John Paul II's *The Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)*. It also includes some of the findings of *Listening 2004*.

### Togetherness is blessing

*Over and over again, way ahead by far of any other family joy (or difficulty) expressed, we heard of the joy of simply being together, in times of gathering and celebration, and in ordinary daily routines. This discovery is surely something to celebrate in a church that understands 'being together' as 'the good par excellence' of marriage and family life (Letter to Families 1994). Families talked about:*

*"Sharing outings including shopping, closeness, fidelity, trust, sex, prayer."*

*"Celebrating family life, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, marriages, achievements and just thanking God for all that he has given us."*

*"Trust, love, friendship, marriages and births, working through difficult times, growing stronger as a unit."*

*"The times we share are precious, even in times of sadness or strife (these) are always valued."*

*"Incredible love generated between us. Watching children growing up and being together. Seeing the children's generosity and awareness. Enjoying quiet family times, walks and sitting around the fire."*

Yet, as one participant observed, there seems to be a paradox between families' enjoyment of and need for 'togetherness' and their ability to achieve it when faced with all the other demands on their time. How as a Church can we help families with this? *Not Easy But Full of Meaning #27*

# Families

## living, loving energy...

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

Loving each other can be tough. Every family has its fair share of conflict. *Familiaris Consortio* acknowledges that 'family communion can only be preserved...through a great spirit of sacrifice' (FC,21). Family members are called to develop gospel qualities like generosity, openness and forgiveness. Strengthened by their love for one another, and by practising reconciliation at home, families find the grace to move towards the desire of Jesus 'that they may be one' (Jn 17:21).

### 2. Families serve life (FC, 28-41)

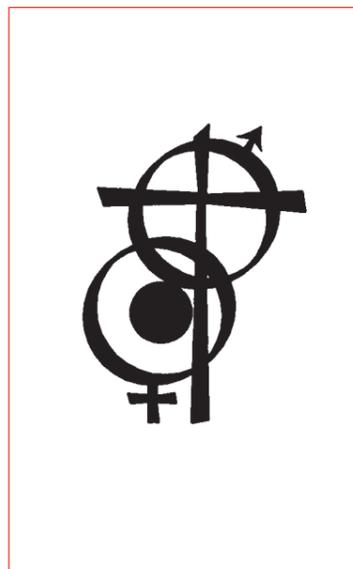
While having children is not the only fruit of marriage, it is without doubt a precious and awe-inspiring way in which families bring new life into the world. Each new person bears the imprint of the divine image, the original blessing of the Creator. Many families find room in their hearts and homes for children who are without a home.

Bringing forth or adopting a child includes the responsibility of helping that new person to live a fully human life. *Familiaris Consortio* emphasises that **parents are the prime educators of their children**. Certainly other people and agencies (like schools) can help. But when it comes to forming a child in God's ways of love, nothing can replace the impact of the parents and the family community. It is in the atmosphere of the home that a child 'catches' a spirit of love...or discovers its lack. It is through the spiritual life of the home that a child first senses a reverence for God...or feels the absence of faith.

It is in the family unit that a child first learns 'those social virtues which every society needs' (FC, 37), including a spirit of service and self-sacrifice.

The task of the Christian family to educate its members is a true ministry through which the Gospel is spread, says *Familiaris Consortio*. Do not think of your family responsibilities as something separate or secondary to the mission of the Church. When you teach your children (and they teach you!) what it means to love, to pray, to celebrate the sacraments and to serve one's neighbour, you are not just 'helping' the Church's mission - **you are living it!**

So central is the family to the life and mission of the Church that it is often called the 'domestic church' or the 'little church'. 'The family called together by word and sacrament as the Church of the home, is both teacher and mother; the same as the worldwide Church' (FC, 38).



### Bright spots and shadows for the family today (FC, 4-10)

*Familiaris Consortio* responded to a critical moment in history: an era in which the family found itself grappling with a multitude of conflicting forces - some positively enriching, others destructive. The situation remains very much the same today. The responses to *Listening 2004* illustrate the pressures that families experience in many areas of their lives, largely through external forces, mostly not of their making and over which they often feel that they have little control or influence. If they cope, families do so in a variety of ways, often drawing on their faith and prayer life. But families also experience the world, with all its changes, as a positive benefit. There is much gratitude and appreciation for the many social and community benefits enjoyed in twenty-first century Britain. The picture of family life in a changing world is complex.

The Church calls all families to a careful 'discernment'; that is, an informed and prayerful reflection on the meaning of life and its fundamental values. In this way families can make wise judgments amidst the complex array of choices on offer in contemporary society.



### The decision

'I have a childhood memory of my parents standing in the kitchen exchanging sharp words. Suddenly my father broke the cycle of tension, went up to mum and tapped her gently on the arm saying expectantly, "Hey, tell me something..." Her scowl relaxed into a half-smile before returning her half of the equation: "I love you", she said. I gradually learned that this little exchange, repeated again and again over 42 years of marriage, symbolised for them a powerful decision: "No issue is so big that we will ever allow it to come between our love for one another"' (VC).

Families have a vital role in protecting human life.

'God creates each human being to be the centre of a new world that is his or her story, a whole world in miniature, a microcosm. In this sense every human being is irreplaceable.' (Cherishing Life #39).

It is through the supportive, practical love of families that the Church can most effectively express its conviction: '...that human life, even if weak and suffering, is always a splendid gift of God's goodness...In each human life she sees the splendour of that "Yes", that "Amen", who is Christ himself. To the "No" which assails and afflicts the world, she replies with this living "Yes"' (FC, 30).

• Describe a family you admire for the way its members live out this "Yes!" to life.

### 3. Families and society (FC, 43-44)

In a family, one's value as a person is not determined by salary, status, age or talents. Rather, a family says to each member: *We love you simply for who you are, you belong to us*. Through their mutual giving and receiving, families are a potent force in society. Since a lack of love is at the root of so many social ills, the world's future depends a great deal on the quality of family life to form individuals in love and care for self and others.

Through hospitality and service among their neighbours, families have a great contribution to make to justice and development. In turn, the State must recognise that 'the family is a society in its own original right... The State can not and must not take away from families the functions that they can just as well perform on their own or in free associations; instead it must positively favour and encourage as far as possible responsible initiative by families' (FC, 45).

### 4. Families share in the life and mission of the Church

Just as we refer to Jesus as 'prophet, priest and king', so the Christian family is called to be:

#### (i) Prophetic

The witness of a Christian family is a 'luminous sign' to its neighbours. Families have a mission to speak and share their lived faith with enthusiasm and conviction (FC, 51-54).

#### (ii) Sacred

How does a family stay open to God? Some tips in this section include family prayer (eg table graces, blessings, scripture reading), a spirit of forgiveness, drawing strength from the Sacraments (FC, 55-62).

#### (iii) Outreaching

The family's mission as 'a community of service' extends beyond itself to the wider community. Families are called to exercise their social conscience as a natural extension of the Christ-like laws of service and justice at work in their homes (FC, 63-64).

#### Healing love

'In my neighbourhood lives a couple with three adopted children. The children all suffered abuse at their former homes. One child had been so emotionally damaged that his speech development was impaired. For a long time he hardly spoke. Thankfully, his adoptive parents have given him a life-giving home. With all the love lavished upon him a bond of trust is strengthening and his speech is returning' (C.A.).

## ...at the heart of the Church's mission.

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

### Pastoral Care of the Family

(FC, 65-85)

In this section, which addresses the many difficulties facing couples and families, two key themes emerge: **COMPASSION** and **TRUTH**. The beliefs held by the Church about marriage and family can be painful for many people, not only for those who have suffered but also for those who feel excluded by the words *marriage and family*.

Faced with such pain we can be tempted to avoid the subject altogether. But when we do this we only undermine our capacity to live the truth. We deprive married people of encouragement, we deprive our children of hope and inspiration, and we fail to recognise the enormity of a divorced person's loss.

Instead of diluting our belief in the lifelong union of woman and man, let us courageously **SPEAK** this truth with love and sensitivity, let us gently **LISTEN** to each other's experience of joy, loss, hope, loneliness, and **REACH OUT** to the hurting instead.

During 2006 the Everybody's Welcome project has created practical resources to help parishes do this.

See [www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk](http://www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk) for more information