

Reflections on the Spiritual Vocation of the Family
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*With my voice unto the Lord have I cried,
with my voice unto the Lord have I made supplication.
I will pour out before Him my supplication,
mine affliction before Him will I declare.
When my spirit was fainting within me,
then Thou knewest my paths.
In this way wherein I have walked they hid for me a snare.
I looked upon my right hand, and beheld,
and there was none that did know me.
Flight hath failed me,
and there is none that watcheth out for my soul.
I have cried unto Thee, O Lord;
I said: Thou art my hope, my portion art Thou
in the land of the living.
Attend unto my supplication,
for I am brought very low.
Deliver me from them that persecute me
for they are stronger than I.
Bring my soul out of prison that I may confess Thy Name.
Psalm 141, from the Vesper Liturgy*

The Psalmist David expresses the cry of the human heart. It is a cry in young and old alike, born of longing to be known in the depth of one's being and recognizing that "there is none that did know me...none that watcheth out for my soul." Gregory the Great (born in Rome c. 540), said that a friend is the guardian of one's soul, *custos animi*.¹ *Custos animi* suggests that there are three elements that characterize spiritual friendship: responsibility for another person's well-being and ultimate salvation, a knowledge of his or her inner life and, a spiritual dimension. Spiritual friendship undergirds my reflection and I will return to it in the latter portion of the discussion endeavouring to draw out its implications for the spiritual vocation of the family.

But first, I would like to begin this reflection on the spiritual vocation of the family at the heart of my personal formation, my mother and father, and in the life and sense of the

world they sought to build together. It was in no sense an ideal. Yet I begin here because their stance towards me and my sisters, their nurture and initiation of us into the world, have come into relief and I see much more sharply how they have informed my thinking of family, the human spirit and our relationship with the stranger in our midst. They are my existential point of departure and, by implication, what I bring to this conversation.

When I was a small boy and through my early teens, I would seek the occasional opportunity to miss school for the day and stay at home engaged in quite another world. This was my mother's world of friendship with neighbour women, a world of conversation focused on their daily struggles with husband, children, school, and how to build a richer life out of the rather meagre resources these women, all immigrants, shared. Even then it seemed a very special and privileged world and, to some extent, a distinct though intimately connected world to the world in which I primarily understood myself to be.

Around the kitchen table these four women sat. I listened attentively from my perch on the kitchen counter, listened and rarely, if ever, spoke. Presided over by my mother's grace these women worked together at understanding their experience, at honing their aspirations and thinking critically about the relationships they wished to nurture in their families and among their friends. I saw one or other of these women fall out of favour with one of the others at the table during the ebb and flow over a ten year period. Sometimes this estrangement would last for three weeks and sometimes for several years. My mother welcomed them always, together or alone, to talk of the other, of their estrangement and finally, to be reconciled and join again in the morning time of conviviality with its modest communion.

¹ Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community, The Monastic Experience, 350-1250* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1988):xv. McGuire discusses Gregory the Great's consideration of this theme and the seminal contribution to it by the Eastern Church Fathers in the first chapter of this book.

Here I saw nurture. Here, around the kitchen table, I saw my mother express her strongest opinions and judgements without taking sides that deepened alienation. The nurture was in the midst of common struggle to understand our lives together in the world. Here I glimpsed the enlarged circle of the family, a circle that most assuredly included neighbours in all conditions of communion or alienation. Here, in the smallest of circles beyond the nuclear family, I heard the human story, its joy and sorrow, its self-interest and sacrifice, alienation, confession and, on occasion and usually over a considerable period of time, restoration. The great themes of human life were all present in modest and very human proportions around the kitchen table.²

It was in this filial sanctuary that my soul's delight in grace and healing, my regard for the art of listening to the human story, and my interest – however modest – in helping people tell their heart, was first formed. They are my mother's spiritual gifts to me.

My father bequeathed to me another set of spiritual gifts. They involve the invitation to explore and engage the world beyond household and neighbourhood, the world beyond friend and family. While the ideal nurture and care stands at the centre of my mother's gifts, initiation into the life of the world and care for the stranger stand at the centre of my father's world. It is clear to me when I consider our Saturday morning sojourns together, journeys at the heart of my childhood formation.

Early Saturday morning, before much was stirring in the household, we would leave, walk several blocks through the neighbourhood, and catch the bus which would take us to the centre of Edmonton. In the 1950s Edmonton was a modest provincial capital serving a

² In my mother's time of dying we had a wonderful conversation in which I mentioned my father's description of her many years before. I had talked to my father about my mother's somewhat self-deprecating comments which would occasionally surface. My father's response highlighted her gift as a natural psychologist and that she need only reflect on her morning conversations with Mrs. McCoy, Wigston, Derk and Mastalish to see this gift.

largely agricultural area. Often one would meet an acquaintance, friend, or neighbour on its main streets and nods of recognition were more common than not.

This was the weekly trek to pick up groceries for the family. Woodward's was the largest department store in the city and it had a wonderful food section. My father, a native son of Norway who loved the gifts of his homeland, was always able to find a little Norwegian cheese – Nokkelost or Gammelost – or a tin of King Oscar Sardines, caught by the fishermen in his home town of Stavanger and packaged there, as well as the wonderful gifts of the earth from his adopted Canadian soil. Creation's gifts were a delight and pleased his heart.

We always left the groceries at Woodward's to be picked up later when we were ready to go home. We would then walk over to the Rice Street Fish Market and smell the sea, lakes, and rivers. I played with the sawdust on the floor. On special occasions my father would pick up a few Icelandic herring, or perhaps a few shrimp, or a crab boiled on board the fishing boat and ready to be eaten. Their brilliant red colour brings my father's image to mind to this day. Shrimp and crab were his own special treat, eaten with great gusto, a communion of memory, bringing his childhood home to our table. Anyone invited to join in this raw feast from the sea was privileged indeed. As a child, I disliked the smell and would rarely have a taste of these delicacies even when they were offered. But even then I knew that those who were offered a nibble were blessed people in my father's eyes.

From the fish market, we walked briskly over to Mike's Newsstand for a quick browse of the newspapers in the many native languages of the immigrants like us who made up a substantial portion of the city. Only much later did I realize that my father's reading of the *Stavanger Aftenbladet*, standing at Mike's counter, was the only regular contact, beyond his mother's letters, with his homeland, family and friends and with the shaping and reshaping

of the little precious country dear to his heart. Then it was off to the Communist Book Shop and an ongoing conversation in which the proprietor's Marxist and utopian vision and philosophical idealism was challenged by my father's understanding of the Christian Gospel's call to love and justice. The Communist understanding of the Good and my father's understanding of the Good shared many aspirations for the life of the world but it was quite clear to me as a child that the Gospel's call to divine love required a transformation distinct from all ideological utopianism. Yet, these conversations taught me very early in life the extraordinary value of lengthy conversations with those who one disagrees with and how one must strive to understand the deep, shared motivations and aspirations undergirding our common struggle to understand our life together in the world.

We would go to the Bible House next, leisurely browse its shelves and my Father would introduce me to books of all sorts. Rarely would I ask about a book or subject without getting a tour through the intellectual landscape of some quarter of Christendom – its particular preoccupations, heresies, and insights.

Often on these Saturday sojourns, somewhere along the winding path between the gifts of the earth and the life of the mind, we would be summoned by a stranger begging. Destitute or derelict, immigrant or one of Canada's First Peoples, or from established family and simply down on his luck, this person would ask us for money. My father never turned away from the stranger that had expressed his need. Often he would invite the person to come and have a meal with us. In later life I realized that these were the only times I ever sat in a restaurant with my father. Restaurants were beyond my parents' means but the needs of the stranger³ was different. Often the beggar would express surprise and we would go

³ Several years ago I read Michael Ignatieff's brilliant book *The Needs of Strangers* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990) in which he sketches the dehumanization of our concrete relationship to the poor. These Saturday sojourns accompanied me through the entire reading of the book and prompted me to think about

together to a little cubby hole restaurant on Edmonton's infamous 97th Street. Occasionally the meal was almost silent as our guest was unable to talk. Despair often renders one speechless. But often, after a slow start, we would be taken on a little journey into our guest's life story, a journey of hope, aspirations, accident, tragedy, missed opportunity, sin, failure and sorrow. Our guest would eat, talk a little and eat a little more. I would have a soft drink and listen with wonder at how life unfolded. My father would savour his coffee, listening with remarkable care and understanding, and express a modest sense of human solidarity with our guest in speaking about those things which resonated with his experience and the experience of "the great cloud of witnesses," the men and women of the Bible.⁴ There was never judgement and virtually no advice ever crossed his lips in these moments. Rather, there were a few shared tears, words of hope softly spoken, and the deepest sympathy for those who dwell in the city of despair. I suppose it was in these conversations that I realized in my heart that my father had at some point in the past also known the streets of that city and that his capacity to walk through them again with our guest had both to do with his knowledge of them and the grace which had flooded his life and led him to the other side of despair.

Riding the bus home from these Saturday sojourns, the existential meaning of so much of the Biblical story was brought forward to illumine the life we had shared during these holy moments. On a few occasions our guest accompanied us home for a few days, to

the conversations at the Communist bookshop, the Bible House and with our guest and the needs of strangers.

⁴ The pietist movement in Norway had deeply shaped my father's spiritual life. One of the gifts of this movement, which much later I learned had engaged Saint Tikhon Zadonsky (see Nadejda Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon Zadonsky: Inspirer of Dostoevsky*, London: S.P.C.K., 1951), is its regard for the Bible as the companion of the faithful deepening regard for the world and growth in co-suffering love. The Bible is not a proof text to be used to proclaim one's righteousness but a spiritual companion to deepen one's transformation into a loving person.

join in the Christmas feast and dance, as Norwegians⁵ do, around the Christmas tree on the eve of the Saviour's birth.

Later in life, much later, at the time of his dying, I realized my father wished to accomplish something in me. With my mother, he sought, as best they knew how, to provide a formation as steward of my understanding, my soul. They were not devoured, as so many have been, by a crisis of identity around the vocation of parenting. A spiritual vocation was at the centre of their understanding of the purpose of family.

At the centre of my recollections of childhood are sensibilities I now see as the formation my parents sought to give their children. The first is the capacity for hospitality. There was, both at my mother's table and on my father's sojourns, a delight in the greeting and welcoming of others, neighbour, stranger, and the disinherited. Hospitality – that fostering of convivial relationship between friends, strangers and the disinherited – harkens back to Abraham and Sarah's welcoming of the strangers to their table and to Jesus' parable of the man who fell among thieves. These images illumined my parent's sensibilities and anchored their daily life. These Biblical images, stories and texts had nurtured the gift of grace bearing hope, a hope, born out of their own experience of despair. This landscape of meaning had reoriented their spirit and given them the capacity to be attentive to the unfolding mystery of grace, the texture of meaning, in the very midst of the struggle of life. This grace had saved both my mother and father from the cynicism of spirit which turns one inward to self-interest, a shadow world born of fear and closed to the surprise of life. My parents valued the art of caring for the life of the world and this call to care was a discipline they exercised against the appetite for selfishness and the mind set of judgement and

⁵ Norwegian Pietism, the tradition that had shaped my father, prohibited dancing. On the eve of the Feast of the Incarnation, certainly the most articulated of our household feasts, the Christmas tree was moved into

exclusion. This is the existential ground on which I stand to consider the spiritual vocation of the family.

Christian Understanding of Family

Family, contrary to popular opinion within many Christian churches, does not fare particularly well in the scripture. Just as older sons and daughters are often depicted in the midst of enormous struggles, so family, in any sense that it has been understood in the last three centuries in western Europe, is virtually always dysfunctional or in disarray. Curiously virtually none of the families of the Bible would be fit neighbours for the Christian Right and the so-called Moral Majority. Consider the Biblical images of Adam and Eve, of Noah and his sons, the patriarchs and matriarchs, the brief glimpses we have of family in the Prophetic literature and the life of David. Consider what Jesus had to say about the family.

What to make of this endless string of families in disarray? Christianity is in no sense a domestic religion, a religion of family values as they have been so cruelly defined in recent years. Perhaps the nub of the issue is that with the Bible and within much of the Christian tradition family is never defined in domestic terms. In fact, it would not be untoward to suggest that much of the early writings of the Christian tradition sought to redefine the nature of filial⁶ community in the face of Jewish domestic tribalism and the tight exclusionary circle various pagan faiths of the time drew around the hearth. A dominant strain of Jewish faith and the faith of the Greco-Roman world was focused on family, tribe, and citizenship in the context of their specific communities. Christianity enlarged the circle considerably, returning to its Jewish origins in speaking about the “whole people of God” as

the centre of the room and, with joined hands, all danced around it singing a Norwegian carol in praise of the birth of the Son of Righteousness.

⁶ The words of Jesus, “Who is my mother and father?” echo through Christian texts right up to the eighteenth century when we see the rise of the bourgeois family in Europe capture the discourse on the family.

the family of faith and of the stranger, the desolate, the needy as simply those estranged from their proper place at the table of the Lord. 300 years after Jesus walked the Galilee, St. John Chrysostom (born 347) critiqued the return of many Christians in Antioch to the Jewish and Greco-Roman faiths of their ancestors largely on the basis of their desire for a much more comfortable, less demanding and more exclusionary, stance towards the poor, the stranger and the destitute.⁷ The idolatry of the domestic family is an ancient issue in Christian self-definition and it is not surprising to read that Chrysostom suggesting that this return to “domestic faiths” is precisely a failure of nerve around the call of the Gospel to minister to all God’s children, including “the least of these.”

Christian teaching has been rather short on a spirituality of family, at least as family has come to be understood in Western Europe and America in the last two hundred years. We need to consider the implicit understanding of the family of faith which Jesus called all his followers to claim including his own parents.⁸ There are several themes that need to be considered as an opening to think through the spiritual vocation of the family.

A Radically Inclusive Definition of the Family

Christian family, by definition, is first and foremost the human family, all of God’s children, without the usual discriminations made on the ground of marital or legal status, parentage, gender, class, and tribe. This rather grand conception of family may strike the critic as far too abstract and ideal. My only point is that this understanding is intended to be

⁷ J.N.D. Kelly, long time Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, and University Lecturer in Patristic Studies, has given us an illuminating picture of this issue in his superb book, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom, Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (London: Duckworth, 1995).

⁸ There is a long standing Christian teaching grounded in the account of Jesus among the rabbis in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was twelve years old the text tells us when His parents travelled to the temple in Jerusalem. After the festivities were completed and Mary and Joseph had journeyed a day from Jerusalem on their way home they discovered that Jesus was not with them so they returned to the temple to find him. When they ask Jesus why He has treated them so, He responds to their question saying that He was about His Father’s business debating with the rabbis. Mary, as His first

formative for the faithful's thinking about the shape and nature of the family. This idea provides the point of orientation in all consideration of the shape of our ideas about family. It needs to inform, in human proportions, the process of spiritual formation in the family, the value it places on the sanguine "ties that bind," its self-definition as a primary spiritual community, a way of shaping the child's sense of vocation and relationship to the world of friend, neighbour and stranger. While these are all of interest to a discussion of the spiritual vocation of the family, it is with a Biblical regard for the human family, a regard at the centre of Jesus' teaching, that we must start.

The Idolatry of the Ideal Family

Family, from a Christian perspective, cannot be collapsed into the image of the Bourgeois-Christian family that developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe. The collapse of the image of the Christian family into American images of the suburban family at the end of the twentieth century is even less legitimate as a Christian image. There is no ideal family, from a Christian perspective, and certainly the bourgeois European family and the American suburban family, so much longed for and idealized in popular culture in our day, was anything but Christian in its conception.

First these types of family structure are creatures of a particular historical circumstance as all the histories of the family well document. They have developed within very narrow political, cultural and economic frameworks. The Bourgeois-Christian family has its origins in the merchant and professional classes that are largely responsible for the development of modern democracies in the West. Second, this conception of the ideal family is centred on family interest (self-centred if you will) and thus inherently closed. It is on this legacy that the image of the ideal family of the Moral Majority in America has

disciple the tradition tells us, listened with great care to His teaching so she could carry it forward in her

constructed its nostalgic image of family and lobbied for various social and political policies in the political arena as a means of extending this particular image of family. The logical consequence of this image of the ideal family is the suburban gated communities of middle America. This ideal image of the nuclear family, rampant since the 1950s, is predicated on fear, self-interest and nostalgia. To the extent that this captures our thinking we are engaged in a form of idolatry of the family and its leads to the pursuit of the development of a narrow set of cultic notions about the family.

My argument is not intended to disregard the concerns of many on the so-called Christian Right, concerns for serious parenting and for those disciplines that enhance our capacity for service and responsibility. My argument simply suggests that these concerns have been used for ulterior political purposes which themselves are contrary to the call of the Gospel. I also see these arguments as deleterious to serious thinking about the spiritual vocation of the family because they reduce the question to one of morality, idealization and nostalgia.

The image of the family gathered in a circle around the domestic fireplace, as comforting as it may be to us, is closer to the ancient image of the worship of Hestia, Goddess of the hearth, in ancient Rome, than it is to the worship of the One Lord of all creation. A family is Christian to the degree that it is both nurturing and open, caring for each of those in its midst and welcoming, indeed, seeking the stranger as part of its fullness.

Family in this sense is not mother, father, and a few treasured children, as good as that obviously is. Rather, family is a community of people living, loving, and struggling together beyond the boundary of their immediate isolation and self-interest. That is why

some of the earliest Christian families we read about in the Christian tradition were women⁹ – single, widowed, and divorced – struggling together for their soul’s salvation and for the restoration of the world in which they lived. Early Christian images of the family included communities of women, monasteries, villages, and kinship. In all of them the stranger had a place upon his or her arrival. The stranger was always understood as a fellow pilgrim with gifts and needs to share with those who welcomed them just as those who were already gathered together had gifts and needs.

This in no way diminishes the vocation of families to serve the children they are blessed with. Rather, it reorients the way families go about the spiritual formation of children, setting a concern for the child’s growth into union with God and nurturing each one’s capacity to love the life of the world. The spiritual life of the family is precisely to cultivate and nurture this capacity in the child, in each other and in the stranger. The family needs to work at becoming a spiritual steward of this dimension of human growth.¹⁰ An image of the comfortable family gathered around mother and father at the hearth is not an end in itself. This image is meaningful to the extent it expressed confidence in all those present. To the extent this image is real, it provides a context for the capacity to love life and overcome one’s own self-interest and be a servant in the healing of the wounds of life.

The spiritual vocation of the family is a kind of hot house of spiritual formation for parents and children alike. Parents exercise their spiritual gifts to the degree they are – as was the bishop in the early church – able to discern the needs and gifts within their context and bring them together for the sake of healing the soul and kindling a deep regard for the gifts

⁹ Recent studies on women in the early church such as Jo Ann McNamara’s introductory book, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985) are helpful in reorienting our thinking about the nature of Christian families. Also see Brenda Meehan, *Holy Women of Russia* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993)

of creation and the capacity of all those in their midst to live compassionately with each other and the stranger.

The Spiritual Vocation of Family

The Christian point of departure in thinking about the spiritual vocation of family needs to be discussed within the framework of the spiritual journey, the call to sanctification which is the foundation of Christian spiritual life. The spiritual vocation of the family, like that of the church, is to help the person – child and adult alike – awaken to the depth of their human nature and develop the capacity for co-suffering love. Family provides a context in which the human condition, our struggle to become whole and present to God’s world, is vivid. It is a context where the search for meaning for our lives is sanctioned, and to whatever degree possible, encouraged. So when we hear people – politicians and evangelists alike¹¹ – speak of family values we must ask them what precisely they mean. What are they calling for? Where in their picture of the family does the nurture of the human capacity for compassion, to love the stranger and overcome selfishness, fit? If this is not central to their image of the family, if the nurture of the capacity for co-suffering love is not the ultimate family value, the evangelist or politician is not speaking about the Christian family no matter how many times he or she may use the word.

So little has been written about the spiritual vocation of the family from a Christian perspective. I would like to reflect on the following spheres of consideration as a point of departure for a conversation on the spiritual vocation of the family suggesting what the Christian tradition has to offer to the contemporary debate on family values.

¹⁰ Elias Matsagouras, *The Early Church Fathers as Educators* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1977) surveys the traditional understanding of this theme.

¹¹ This issue has been debated extensively by intellectuals within the evangelical protestant sphere. After a decade of consideration we can read, within their own journals, the beginnings of a critique. See Richard John Neuhaus, “Ralph Reed’s Real Agenda,” *First Things*, October 1996, Number 66:42-45.

1. A Call to be Holy¹²

Perhaps the most fundamental gift of the family and the foundation of its spiritual vocation is in its natural capacity for the recognition of the wonder of being. This keen experience of recognition which parents and siblings often feel when holding a new-born child moments after birth is the natural expression of this gift. Healthy families claim this gift and seek to cultivate and broaden it within each person. Families unable to do this because of their tragic sense of brokenness suffer enormously and need healing, not judgement and harassment. A regard for the being of each person, not in the potential or in terms of some other abstraction, but in their fragile humanity, their mortality and particularity is the lesson to be drawn from this natural grace.

Recognition of the person and a concern that the person, child or adult, come to the fullness of their being,¹³ is not an abstraction or fanciful theological notion. Rather it only occurs when, as we see in Jesus' encounters in the Gospels over and over again, we are present to each other in the particular moments of our present experience. The capacity for such presence is the first fruit of prayer and that is the reason for the spiritual disciplines that animate the life of Christians.

The capacity for presence always summons us to be attentive to the context of our life together. The call to be holy is always a call within and to a particular existential context. The context in which we live, in which we raise our children, care for the elderly, welcome the stranger and nurture each other has its own particular features. It requires that we

¹² Marcio Fabri dos Anjos, "Building a Spirituality of Family Life," *The Family*, edited by Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995): 99-109. This volume is published in the series *Concilium* 1994/5.

¹³ It is a little difficult to speak about the fullness of being at the end of the twentieth century. Public discourse on the nature of the person is crowded with the literature of one form or another of the human potential movement. The fulfillment of the being of a person is distinct from the fulfillment of their potential in two areas: the relationship of person to community and cosmos, and, the place of co-suffering love in the Christian understanding of the being of the person.

consider and have some regard for the need of children to grow and mature and become capable adults able to engage the challenges of our life in the world. It requires a regard for the ambiguity of family and social life, an ambiguity that our day is particularly preoccupied with. Context always challenges utopian dreaming and nostalgia. It calls us to be present to our moment in history and to eschew the cacophony of demands, idealizations, desires and passions that surround us in such intense ways in our over heated world of commercial and ideological fantasy.

2. A Wise Understanding of Love

The Christian tradition has proclaimed that love is the primary way we know God. Many of us assent to this teaching. Christianity teaches us that this love is in no sense romantic and not a thing in itself. Love as we understand it in scripture, in the life of Christ, and in the Christian tradition is not a noun, a thing. Rather, as the Church Fathers and Spiritual Mothers of the Christian East have so ably taught, love is the disposition of our action in the midst of life experience. Consequently, the second aspect of the spiritual vocation of the family is its capacity to temper our raw experience of the wonder of being into an enduring love and help it grow in modesty. Love is never love when it is captured by a utopian ideal. Love is not enchantment.¹⁴ Love is born of the type of recognition of being we have noted above and the context of living together quickly tempers it. This tempering

¹⁴ W.H. Auden has a remarkable reflection on enchantment in *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970): 149-150. He says: "Recognizing idols for what they are does not break their enchantment. All true enchantments fade in time. Sooner or later we must walk alone in faith. When this happens, we are tempted, either to deny our vision, to say that it must have been an illusion and, in consequence, grow hardhearted and cynical, or to make futile attempts to recover our vision by force, i.e., by alcohol or drugs. A false enchantment can all too easily last a lifetime. Christ did not enchant men; He demanded that they believe in Him. Except on one occasion, the Transfiguration. For a brief while, Peter, James, and John were permitted to see Him in His glory. For that brief while they had no need of faith. The vision vanished, and the memory of it did not prevent them from all forsaking Him when He was arrested, or Peter from denying that he had even known Him. God loves all men [and women] but is enchanted by none. My neighbour: someone who needs me but by whom I am not enchanted."

process, the result of enduring relationships, can lead to cynicism and disillusionment when the understanding of love fails to move beyond the raw experience of recognition.

In considering the spirituality of family we need to develop a wise understanding of love, an understanding that accounts and articulates the journey from the wonder of recognition to the tempered state of affection where joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure and the path of living are central. I think there are two features to this: proclamation and compassion.

The action of love itself as the Christian revelation so brilliantly proclaims, tells us, that all human beings are born from love, at least from the love of God, and born to be bearers of love in the world. No person is born for success, progress, or individual freedom, however good they may be seen to be in any period in history. All ideals, all aspiration, no matter how virtuous they may appear are not the foundation of the being of the human.

Given that the debate on family values has focused on questions of reproduction and the rights and responsibilities associated with it, it is necessary to note that the action of love has nothing to do with reproductive capability. Christianity – despite the common preoccupation with images of the suburban family in the current debate on family values – is not a fertility religion. We are not Canaanites or romantics. Rather, at the heart of the human journey, as Christianity so clearly teaches, our created nature is made for solidarity with each other, a solidarity found as completely in entering into the suffering and struggle of each other as it is in communing joy. It is on this ground that we come to understand why our faith places such value on forgiveness and holds up the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Christ for us to contemplate.

The tragedy of so much of the family values debate is that it has side-tracked the central concern for deepening the faithful growth in compassion in the face of all those anxieties that preoccupy both the political right and left in this discussion.

3. A Capacity for Grace Bearing

The spiritual vocation of the family – whether grounded in the love of husband and wife or communities of spiritual friendship – is to nurture the capacity for co-suffering love. This is the heart of discipleship and the fruit of the spiritual disciplines of the Church. Growth in a grace bearing life is as much the task of the family as it is that of the Church. The cultivation of the stance of grace towards others initially formed in the family must grow to include the stranger and finally all the world. This is the spiritual apprenticeship all have been called to, an apprenticeship the family has a natural capacity to serve.

This apprenticeship is what moves us beyond our own concerns and self-interest, so love can be deeply spiritual and thus, be integrally human. This apprenticeship is what the Christian family may provide and what we mean when we speak of family as domestic church. This apprenticeship is what the church provides as a community of God's people when it is not a dysfunctional collectivity of self-interest or a moral society of privileged values.

4. Call to Be a People for the World

The final theme I would like to suggest for consideration as we think about the spiritual vocation of the family is that of how we initiate our children into the life of the world. In my own experience this was done through the Saturday journeys with my father, journeys from household and home into the heart of the city, from the hearth where familiarity was normal, into the heart of the human story spoken by strangers and always a matter of surprise.

Jesus was rather hard on the family. He saw families closing in on themselves, being only concerned for their own self-interest. So He called for a break with family ties for the sake of following Him. He is hard on the family because of His sense of the purpose of the family. The family, as Jesus understood it, was not simply a matter of sanguine ties. Rather, family had the capacity and purpose of building up human character, nurturing confidence, strength and judgement so the person can enter the life of the world in a self-giving way. The family was to nurture its young for the sake of the healing and blessing of the world.

None of us become servants of God's world capable of the wonder of life or of ministering to the healing of the world without a process of initiation. It is this process of initiation and how we can go about it, that is missing entirely from the current thinking about family values. Here, surely, is where our faith with its understanding of the human struggle, its theology of corporate redemption, its teaching about compassion and healing can provide the faithful with guidance.

I learned on those Saturday journeys that there was nothing to fear in the life of the world despite its appearance of trauma, estrangement and dereliction. Trauma, estrangement and, indeed, dereliction, have been a part of all our lives if we but only see it. When grace has healed the eye of our own soul and the trauma, estrangement and dereliction no longer orient our vision of the world we are able to see Christ in the stranger within our midst. There is an enormous relief in this, freeing us to walk the streets of the world with a new confidence and enjoyment of its fragile character. On the streets we are given grace upon grace as the human story unfolds, blessing us in the very midst of our acts of blessing.

Conclusion

The spiritual vocation of the family I suggest we consider is grounded in the call to be holy. We nurture it in our children and in each other through cultivating a wise

understanding of love. Where this is understood the family cultivates in its young the capacity to be grace bearing through an apprenticeship in the arts of listening to the human struggle and blessing each person in the midst of their trauma, estrangement or dereliction. This is the context in which formation for the life of the world takes place and the person comes to join in the community of God's people who live for the life of the world.

The spiritual vocation of the family, not through some sort of abstract idealism but through its struggles, its dysfunction and moments and seasons of grace, helps each person grow into mature human beings expressing the same confidence towards creation that is expressed by God as creator, by Christ as lover of the world, and by the Holy Spirit the giving of Life to life.

The Christian family will:

1. Call all those in its midst to holiness through recognition and the cultivation of a regard for the real context in which we live;
2. Cultivate a wise understanding of human love by helping each person see love as that action which proclaims life as the domain of compassionate human relationships;
3. Nurture a grace bearing disposition through the dailyness of self-giving, a school of apprenticeship in the art of grace;
4. Make it possible for us to be men and women for the life of the world by initiating us to its wonder and delight and its sorrow and suffering.

In the icon corner of Orthodox families we see the icon of the Theotokos and the icon of Christ. They are both prophetic and revelatory. They speak to us of the gift of being church, the place of spiritual birth, of nurture and formation. Through this gateway, for the church is a type of the Theotokos, we are called to join Christ in the Messianic proclamation

to the world: that life is not lived from the precincts of fear and desire, but out of our created nature's capacity to love each other, friend, stranger and enemy, as God has loved us.

The icon of the Theotokos is the icon of the human vocation, calling us to be birth-givers of divine love in the world. The icon of Christ is the icon of our nature, affirming our being as sons and daughters of the One Who is a Lover of all human kind and longs for us to come fully into fellowship with life.