The Year of the Family

One translation of the Gospel has it that “the Word was made flesh and \textit{dwelt} amongst us”. Scholars say a better translation would be “pitched His tent amongst us”. That phrase evokes the fragility and intimacy of God’s presence amongst us. Certainly, it was no accident that Christ was born in the midst of a human family, sharing in the fragility and intimacy of our human existence. More than that, showing that the Christ was born in the context of a loving union between a man and a woman.

In this “Year of the Family” we reflect on the beauty and challenge of the family. It is sometimes described as “the basic unit of society”, and that may be satisfactory to a sociologist, but fails to convey the richness of the human dimension within a family. There is love and sacrifice, nurture and joy, security and affirmation. The family is the community that constitutes us, is our locale, our place of meaning, which at times knows incredible joys, and at other times almost unbearable sorrow. In other words, it reflects the whole breadth of our human heart.

There are two points to make in passing. Firstly, marriage is not an affair of the State. It is not up to the State to make or unmake a marriage. Marriage and the human family reflect the mind of God as the Author of Creation. The State simply has no authority to interfere with the nature of marriage, except to protect it. It is not up to the State to rearrange our human nature.

Secondly, in the eyes of virtually all societies, Christian and non-Christian, marriage is constituted by a public vow of lifelong commitment between a man and woman, undertaken to create a union that is to reflect and deepen their love, and is open to bringing new life into the world. The nurturing of young life demands a permanence, a steadfastness of stability and displays of love over all the years of growth.

As said, this is the understanding of all societies, not just the Christian Church. Same-sex attraction cannot constitute marriage in this understanding.

In October the Synod of Bishops, with married and lay representation present, will conduct its Synod on the family. Last year Catholic people throughout the world were asked to make their comments about the family and what the issues are, and each country sent in its summary. Our diocese sent its own comments in as part of that. They are on our diocesan website at \texttt{www.pp.catholic.org.au}. For this year’s Synod a further group of questions has been sent out, and they number thirty-six. In discussing this with others, in our diocese we reduced the questions to what we thought were the six main ones, for the discussion of our people. They are:
1. How can couples living together before marriage or in de facto relationships be encouraged to choose marriage? (10)
2. What could be done to help people better understand the greatness and beauty of the indissolubility of marriage? (11)
3. How can the family be helped to become “the domestic Church” with a missionary vocation? How can we help develop a family spirituality? (14)
4. What could the Parish do to offer more effective marriage preparation? (17)
5. How can we respond better to people of same-sex attraction and their families? (25)
6. What more can be done to promote a sense of parenthood as divine vocation? What more can be done to help parents in their educational mission, especially in transmitting the faith to their children? (27)

The number in brackets after each one indicates the number on the official list of thirty-six.

I believe the great need we have in the Year of the Family is to alert and help our families understand that they are the prime teachers of the faith to their children, and that if the love of Christ is not perceived in the midst of the family, then few agencies like the school or a sermon in the church can ordinarily make much progress. Parents must teach their children how to pray, and the parish and school must help the parents in this. There should be prayer in the family as a common experience, perhaps if only Grace at meals. Better if it goes further, and the parents sit with their children to review the day, and make their prayers to the Lord before they drift into sleep. If children saw their parents come in to bless them as they went to bed, then the child could see how important the faith was to the two most loved persons in their lives, their mother and father. And the family home should have some sign of the faith, an image of Christ on the cross, or of Mary or one of the Saints, somewhere. And do the children ever see their parents praying, taking God seriously, or reading the Scriptures?

May the Year of the Family really be a time for our families to grow as “the domestic Church”. The Church will not be reborn until born again in the family.

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