

THE FAMILY: TEACHER OF HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

An Australian Perspective

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WE LIVE IN a continent with a population of only twenty-two million people living mainly on a coastal fringe. We have a strong multicultural and multiracial mix. About three quarters of Australians are at least nominal Christians, including about one quarter who are Catholic.

We are a typical Western secular culture with all the advantages and disadvantages that flow from that. In recent years, individualism and materialism have contributed to a loss of religious practice and ideals and breakdown of marriage and family life.

Yet it is still well recognised that it is in the family that basic attitudes are developed, for better or for worse—our attitudes to racism, sexism, care for the poor and even personal habits such as drinking alcohol. A recent Australian campaign to reduce alcoholism has the slogan ‘You are being watched’ and shows a picture of a child looking up at a wine glass in a parent’s hand.

When the Holy Father set the theme for this World Meeting of Families, he was expressing a reality: God communicates with us principally through those closest to us.

So every human interaction is a potential opening for God’s grace. That occurs most especially in families. So families are a major agent for social good and when we pass on Christian values, we are passing on val-

ues that develop the human person in the fullest sense. Families *are* teachers of human and Christian values.

This reality is often underestimated for a number of reasons. One reason is the number of difficulties facing many families. Their needs seem endless and quite rightly we give them a high priority. In Australia the Church has a highly developed system of diocesan agencies that have pioneered social welfare in our country.

However, it is important to recognise not only the *needs* but also the *gifts* that are present in all families. A focus on just needs without recognition of the gifts of families saps our energies and can induce a sense of hopelessness.

A typical example is amongst our indigenous people who comprise 2% of the population. Rural aboriginal communities have one of the lowest standards of living in the world. The destruction of traditional tribal and family values has undercut the heart of their cultural life and robbed them of hope. Large sums of money are being spent to address the urgent needs and much more has to be done. However, one of the lessons of this situation seems to be that the best hope for long term improvement is based on respect for aboriginal people themselves and that means their culture and especially their family values.

So family is an essential agent for passing on human values, across the whole spectrum of society, from the strongest to the most challenged.

Family—Gift and Strength

For this presentation, we will focus on some approaches that help us to learn from families and to encourage their giftedness. We will draw from our own experiences as chaircouple of the Australian Catholic Marriage and Family Council. This is an Advisory Council to the Australian Bishops. It grew out of the experience of Australian couples who attended the Second World Meeting of Families in Rio de Janeiro in 1997. They were inspired by the concept of the family, not only as an area of need, but also as ‘gift and hope for humanity’, in other words, the family as *subject* and not just object of *pastoral care*. The Council continues to promote this concept of ‘evangelisation through the family’.

Affirmation

Families need to be affirmed in this evangelising role. Families are not ‘ordinary’, they are ‘extraordinary’. We need to recognise their gifts and affirm them for the good that they do. When people recognise the good that they do, they do it better.

Growth through challenge

Affirmation does not in any way ignore the problems of families, rather, it gives them meaning. Families are strong and gifted, partly *because* of the challenges in their relationships, not just *despite* them. All relationships experience some degree of failure.

There is no such thing as a perfect family or a perfect marriage. When we first met we fell in love. Then when we ran into problems in our relationship, the real process of growth in our love began and the depth of bonding between us comes from having worked through hurts and disappointments. Families,



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with all their complex intergenerational relationships, face a myriad of problems. Yet these are major opportunities for growth.

Learning from families with disabilities

The response of families to a member with disabilities is one of the great lessons of life. Such families provide great lessons in hope, generosity, hospitality, commitment and courage. The witness of such families teaches us that each person is precious and wonderfully loved by God. It is a wonderful antidote to the utilitarianism of modern society.

Largely through the life experience and efforts of one couple, the Australian Catholic Disabilities Council, has been formed. Its national network provides resources for families and parishes. It spreads the message of Jean Vanier regarding people with disabilities. He wrote: ‘It’s not a question of going out and doing good to them; rather receiving the gift of their presence transforms us¹’.

Learning from the experience of families in the ‘front line’ of social change

Families also need to be affirmed for their role in the front lines of a changing society. The lived experience of families provides enormous insights into how to respond to a range of sensitive situations such as divorce and remarriage, premarital sex, cohabitation and abortion.

What do you say to your children when you are planning a family reunion at Christmas and one of the adult children wants to bring home a same-sex partner? How do you

express the truth of Christ's *teaching* and Christ's *love* to younger, possibly less mature children or grandchildren? While the institutional Church grapples with how to express issues at a very public level, families are working on this front daily. In the midst of these challenges, there can be wonderful compassion and respect for truth. The rest of the Christian community needs to be learning from their insights.

Again, single parent families represent about 14% of all Australian families, most often as a result of separation or divorce². Sadly, they often feel alienated and unwelcome by the rest of the Church community. Yet very often they provide examples of courage and commitment in the face of adversity from which others can learn.

At the same time, broken hearts need healing. The area of abortion is one of particular need as approximately one in five pregnancies in Australia ends in abortion³. A recent initiative in Australia, under the direction of Bishop Eugene Hurley, Chairman of the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life, is a national programme called 'Walking with Love'⁴. It is a listening, loving gentle process. It involves Bishops and laity supporting vulnerable pregnant women, with their husbands, partners and families, to choose life. It involves the embrace and support of those who suffer the after effects of abortion.

The point is that no matter what our circumstances, *every* family—your family, our family, everybody's family—is a place where love is expressed and where the Holy Spirit can work powerfully.

Technological Revolution

Major challenges for the family as teacher of human and Christian values are two revolutions that have radically changed our social landscape—the technological and sexual. They present us with both difficulties and opportunities.

Through the technological revolution we

have a wonderful explosion of information available at our fingertips. It can be used imaginatively and interactively to promote good human and Christian values. Increasingly, faith programmes use DVDs to provide good quality input for small group interaction around the world. Again, following World Youth Day in Sydney, an interactive website, Xt3, has been established to help pilgrims in their ongoing faith journey.

Unfortunately, technology limits our direct contact with each other. Parents feel shut out of the lives of their own children who often spend hours in front of computer screens. Communication with family and friends is increasingly by text messages, Face Book and other modern wonders. Furthermore, internet pornography is a major threat to families while popular TV shows more subtly undermine good human and Christian values.

We would like to make four observations in regard to these challenges:

Importance of human interaction

The first is that parents need to be reassured that they have a natural advantage over technology. We have a wonderful computer at home. It is very smart. Its memory is much better than ours! But our computer can't show love to our children or grandchildren. Furthermore, a basic attitude such as a good work ethic comes from being with someone who enjoys his or her work. A recent government initiative to provide more classroom computers highlighted the point that these are useful but are no substitute for the interaction with the teacher.

Embracing new technologies

Secondly, it follows that parents need to travel the internet highway with their children. We know parents who make a point of watching TV or playing internet games with their children. This creates 'prime time' opportunities to discuss values and share insights.

Setting clear limits

Thirdly, parents also need to be like policemen on the internet highway, controlling unwanted material. In Australia, the Bishops Conference is strongly supportive of the Federal government's plans to introduce internet service provider filtering. The Australian Family Association and other bodies lobby hard at government level to remove sexually explicit music clips shown on TV during prime time.

Using technology in catechesis

And finally, we need to make maximum use of new technologies in providing high quality teaching materials. One young couple use their professional skills to provide media resources known as 'Choice-Ez'⁵. These help high school students navigate their way through the complexities of a sexually charged culture. Another recent example is a 'Total Gift of Self' which is an on-line resource addressing the Church's teaching in the sensitive area of Natural Fertility Methods⁶. These are just examples of technology being put to good use in marriage and family formation.

Sexual Revolution

With regard to the sexual revolution, the biggest challenge is that sex is now seen as an activity independent of relationships and unrelated to procreation. This affects the marital relationship on which the family is based. Other major challenges are the pressure for same sex marriages, the availability of pornography and the premature sexualisation of young children.

Yet the sexual revolution also provides great opportunities. We have a wonderful message! The Church's teaching on sexuality provides a meaningful and fulfilling answer to the major questions of human relationships. So the sexual revolution is an opportunity for evangelisation. As Pope John

Paul II pointed out, sex, in a sense, is a 'constituent part of the person', not just 'an attribute of the person'.⁷

Sexual intimacy

Transmission of this treasured teaching relies heavily on the witness of sacramental marriages, i.e. on couples who appreciate that sexual intimacy is very much part of their marital spirituality—they grow in marital spirituality *through* their sexual relationship and not *despite* it.

Children are attracted to a message that not only makes sense of sex within God's plan for humanity but is expressed in warm, relatable human terms. This is something that is transmitted daily by the married couple themselves in untold numbers of sensitive ways. The more conscious they are of the significance of their sexual relationship, the more effective they are in passing on these values.

Romance

An important antidote to the utilitarian approach to sex is romance. Romantic love is a gift from God. Working on one's romance is part of sacramental love. Young children love to see romance between their parents. Teenagers are far less open about this but possibly even more watchful and interested.

There is an increasing trend in Australian dioceses to honour married couples on their anniversaries in some appropriate liturgical way. This primarily acknowledges their commitment but also affirms the warm human ways in which that is expressed.

Premature sexualization of young children

At the same time families need support to stand up against the pervasive debasing of sex and in particular, the premature sexualization of young children. One good news story is the recently established Womens Forum of Australia which has published an impressive pseudo-magazine that looks like an issue of one of the popular magazines but which exposes the seductive myths of such publications.⁸

Marriage Education and Preparation

To withstand the aggressive onslaught of a secular society, one of the biggest difficulties we face is the low level of ownership and practice of the faith in families. Mass attendance is now 14% compared to about 75% forty years ago. Consequently, many families today have very little contact with the faith community. Even though we have a very highly developed Catholic school system it can only build on what is formed in the family.

So, we need to work towards developing a welcoming and strong catechesis for families. What is needed is a radical turning to Jesus with strong habits of prayer, scripture and the sacraments.

We need to work at this on many fronts. We would now like to touch on some developments and initiatives in response to this situation.

Marriage enrichment

The starting point needs to be the married couple, whose relationship is the foundation of the family. The love and witness of husband and wife give special meaning to the values of commitment and faith that parents pass on to their children. To support couples in their sacramental vocation, a number of dioceses now have Marriage and Family Life Offices. In the Archdiocese of Sydney, a Family and Life Network between parishes was recently established. Also active in marriage enrichment are movements such as Marriage Encounter and Teams. A more recent initiative in Australia is Celebrate Love⁹, a weekend seminar that specifically explores the practical application of the Theology of the Body. This ongoing enrichment and education for married couples needs to be encouraged in the same way as ongoing renewal for clergy and religious.

Marriage preparation—at every level

Just as urgent in today's world in today's world is the need for marriage preparation at every level.

First of all, there is immediate marriage preparation. This is now an established expectation for couples planning to marry in the Catholic Church in Australia, largely through the efforts over many years of the Catholic Society for Marriage Education. At a parish level, preparation is usually through the priest, in conjunction with a Diocesan agency or a Movement.

Immediate marriage preparation is an ideal 'teachable moment'. However, in today's society, promotion of *Humanae Vitae* and the Theology of the Body is extremely difficult. One promising approach is a programme called 'Embrace' which ensures orthodoxy of content through DVDs that are presented in the home of a mentoring couple who provide welcome and witness and ongoing contact¹⁰.

Then there is proximate marriage preparation. Most youth ministers in Australia are young single adults. However, there is a growing awareness that youth groups are a part of the process of marriage preparation, bringing boys and girls together in a spiritually healthy environment. Where possible it is important to call on the charism of married couples to act as role models in youth groups. One of the most appreciated workshops at World Youth Day in Sydney was on the Theology of the Body and was given by an American speaker, Christopher West to 10,000 youth. It highlighted the fact that youth respond well to clear relatable teaching when it explains not only *what* the Church teaches but *why* it teaches it.

Remote marriage preparation takes place in childhood. It depends heavily on the faith and love of the married couple. Parenting starts with and is sustained by the love of Mum and Dad for each other. 'By virtue of their ministry of educating, parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children.'¹¹

Family rituals

Family rituals play a major role in this

task. Rituals are powerful educators. They are repetitive, meaningful, familiar actions that link us with our past. They prepare us for the challenges of life and they are the building blocks of good habits.

The domestic church is the natural centre for faith-based rituals. They can be highly structured or very simple, like grace before meals or a simple blessing as one kisses a child goodnight. Family relationships are always changing, so enormous flexibility is required.

A major family ritual is the family meal. In our country, most meals are not taken as a family and even when the family does sit down together to eat it is often in front of a television screen. However the family meal is a major liturgy of the domestic church. It is a major way in which values are passed on. Human needs do not change, only human situations. So we need to work on new ways of reclaiming the family meal.

Sacramental preparation in the family

One key opportunity for faith formation arises through family-based preparation for the sacraments of initiation. This should offer a welcoming and strong catechesis. It is a special 'teachable moment' for families. As Pope John Paul II said, 'Family, become what you are'.¹²

Sacramental preparation provides opportunities for like-to-like ministry and the creation of supportive networks of faith families. It works specially well when it is a combined effort between parents, parish and school. It is of particular value for those parents who have had little formation themselves and are not part of the faith community. They do not know how to pass on the faith even when they want to. This is an evangelising process that needs to be seen in the context of a much-needed Catholic culture in the home.

Daily Diary for Catholic Primary Schools

A small but significant initiative in this direction last year was the introduction of two innovative products: 'My School Diary' and

'My Reading Record'¹³. They are for Catholic Primary Schools and this year 30% of attending children will have these in their homes. They are short daily opportunities for parent-child interaction around school events and homework. Each page also contains motivational comments about faith, liturgy and prayer. There are also links to family websites where points of interest can be followed up. Both parents and children can use it at their own pace in their ongoing faith formation.

Grandparents

Grandparents play an increasingly significant role in passing on faith values. In Australia, nearly one fifth of grandparents care for grandchildren for an average of about 12 hours per week¹⁴—a high figure when one considers the problems of distance and poor health that often prevent contact.

Grandparents fulfil quite naturally the role of what psychologists call 'significant other adults' in passing on values. This allows children to hear the same messages about common values, but expressed in a variety of ways.

A very small but rapidly growing percentage of grandparents are engaged in primary care of grandchildren. This presents enormous challenges to the older generation as they grapple with emotional pressures, loss of income, changes to their retirement plans and re-learning of parenting skills.

It is worth stressing that the law does not require them to do this. But rarely do they walk away. They are beacons of hope, love and stability for the youngest generation and often are the main support in passing on the faith.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the family remains the first and vital teacher of human and Christian values. The family will always be the natural place in which our deepest yearnings are met—for acceptance, committed relationships and enduring love. It is in the family that children will first hear the word of God and learn to inte-

grate it into daily life. Our challenge is to recognize and value the inherent gifts that they have to carry out this mission that God has entrusted to them. When a family is aware of this gift, 'all the members evangelize and are evangelized.'¹⁵

And as Pope Benedict XVI said, 'Today it is necessary to proclaim with renewed enthusiasm the Gospel of the family.'¹⁶

NOTES

1 *'Our Life Together—a memoir in letters'*, Jean Vanier, HarperCollins Canada Ltd, 2007.

2 ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Services) Info 380—September 2005

3 The incidence of abortion cannot be accurately stated (see Med J Aust 182: 447-452, 2005, Annabelle Chan and Leonie C. Sage) but the above figure is widely accepted on the basis of an annual live birth rate of 285,000 (Aust Bureau of Statistics) and a generally accepted figure of about 80,000 abortions per year.

4 www.walkingwithlove.org.au

5 *'Choicez Media': Values based sex education* www.choicez.com.au

6 *'Total Gift of Self' : Natural fertility methods*

www.totalgift.org

7 Pope John Paul II, *Wednesday Audience*, 21 Nov 1979, 1

8 'Faking It' www.womensforumaustralia.org

9 www.celebratelove.com.au

10 www.embrace.org.au

11 Pope John Paul II, FC 39

12 Pope John Paul II, FC 17

13 www.livingwellmedia.com.au

14 Australian Census Bureau 2006

15 Pope Paul VI, EN 71

16 Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting of the Presidents of the Episcopal Commissions for the Family and for Life of Latin America, Rome, 3rd Dec 2005, par. 4.

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The Christian family, in fact, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity.

—**John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22nd, 1981**