

CHURCH'S MISSION TO PARENTS

by Ian Pinto, *silb*

The Identity of the Family

This may raise a few eyebrows but in fact the Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises. I had never thought of the Bible in this way before and come to think of it, it's true! From the very first book of the Bible to the very last, we have numerous stories, from Adam and Eve to the unity of God's family in heaven in Revelations. The early chapters of Genesis present the human couple in its deepest reality. They tell us that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). Right at creation, God created man within the context of a family. The "image" is in which he made them is his divine creative nature. Thus, he allowed the human family to share in his divine creative act.

The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon capable of revealing God, the Creator. In this way, love becomes the symbol of sharing in the life of God. St. John explains it in his epistle: "Let us love one another for love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love comes to its perfection in us. God is love. The one who lives in love, lives in God and God in him" (1 Jn 4:7, 12, 16). The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection. St. John Paul II had this to say in this

regard, "Our God in his deepest mystery is not solitude, but a family, for he has within himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love."

Significantly, the word which appears most frequently in the Old Testament after the name of God, "YHWH" is "child". Children expand and complete a family. They are considered to be a blessing from God and within Jewish culture it was degrading for a couple not to have a child. You might recall the words of some of the famous figures of the Bible on their bareness: When God promised Abraham a son through Sarah he fell face down and laughed, saying to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? And can Sarah who is ninety have a child?" (Gen 17:17) Sarah herself laughed when Yahweh foretold her imminent pregnancy (Gen 18:9-14). Rachel was still barren while Leah had given birth and out of jealousy she threatened Jacob, "Give me children or I'll die" (Gen 30:1). Hannah, the mother of Samuel was mocked for being barren (1 Sam 1:6). Zechariah met the angel's announcement of John's birth with disbelief (Lk 1:18-20).

In the Apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II wrote, "in the countries of the so-called Third World, families often lack both the means necessary for survival, such as food,

work, housing and medicine, and the most elementary freedoms. In the richer countries, on the contrary, excessive prosperity and the consumer mentality, paradoxically joined to a certain anguish and uncertainty about the future, deprive married couples of the generosity and courage needed for raising up new human life: thus life is often perceived not as a blessing, but as a danger from which to defend oneself" (FC #6). It is quite surprising that in the old days people wearied from being childless while nowadays couples prefer not to have children. Mind you, this apostolic exhortation was written over 30 years ago. It only goes to show that people's attitude towards begetting and nurturing children hasn't improved very much. This is a sorry situation. Since "children", in the words of the psalmist are "a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him. They are like arrows in the hand of a warrior... happy is the man who has his quiver full of them" (Ps 127:3-5)!

The Mission of Parents

The genesis of the family lies in the coming together of a man and woman in love, committed to each other and to their duties to one another. It is almost unthinkable to talk of a family without parents. They are the source of the family and the channel which keeps it flowing and active. The parents are responsible for one another as well as for the children, who are the fruit of their union. The Church invites parents to become aware of the seriousness of their roles and responsibilities

and to take them up courageously, wholeheartedly and steadfastly, notwithstanding the inevitable difficulties, trials and sufferings that will come their way.

I would like to point out just three things the Church expects from parents. In my opinion these three are among the most important characteristics of the vocation of parenthood and therefore worthy of mention and explication.

1) The Church desires that parents be **HOLY**. One of the greatest gifts that parents can give to children after life is faith. Only someone who has something can give it to someone else. For parents to share the faith with children they must possess it themselves and for this reason the Church urges parents to prepare themselves for the important task of sharing their life of faith with their children: "The Lord is entrusting to them the growth of a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a member of the Church" (FC #39).



Gianna Molla (1922-1962) was an Italian pediatrician who was

brought up in a deeply religious family. Her medical career was guided by the teachings of the Church and she resolved to follow her conscience while coming to the aid of others who required assistance. She dedicated her time and energies to charitable work among the elderly besides taking active part in the Catholic Action movement as well as the Saint Vincent de Paul association.

She happily married Pietro Molla in 1955 and they had three children together. In 1961, during the second month of her fourth pregnancy, she developed a fibroma on her uterus. The doctors gave her three choices following an examination: an abortion, a complete hysterectomy, or the removal of the fibroma alone. The Church teaches that life is sacred and therefore anything that threatens life like abortion must be avoided. Keeping this in mind, Molla opted to remove the fibroma alone since she wanted to preserve her child's life; she told the doctors that her child's life was more important than her own. Her baby was delivered via a caesarean section but unfortunately, she died a week later due to septic peritonitis. The daughter she died giving birth to is still alive and has become a doctor specialized in geriatrics. The Church recognized the holiness and heroic sacrifice of Gianna and declared her a saint in 2004.

Like Gianna there are many other men and women, fathers and mothers who live lives of solid faith and virtue. The Church wishes that all her children would

live lives like these – lives of holiness, spent in the service and love of God and neighbour.

2) The Church desires that parents be **LOVING**. It is quite difficult to imagine parents who are loveless but nevertheless parents, and in fact all Christians, are called to live lives of intense and unconditional love.

A young man applied for a managerial position in a big company. His resume looked impressive and he was asked to meet the director for an interview. The director was impressed by the lad's excellent CV and asked him who had paid for his education. The man replied that his parents had done so. The manager inquired about their profession. The young man slightly blushed as he disclosed that they were daily wage labourers. The director requested the youth to show his hands. The youth showed a pair of hands that were smooth and perfect. "Have you ever helped your parents in their work?" the director asked. "Never", came the reply, "my parents always wanted me to study and read more books."

The director asked the youth to go home and clean his parents' hands and then come back the next day. The young man was slightly confused but went back home and asked his parents to let him clean their hands. They hesitantly showed their hands to their son and as he cleaned them tears rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time he noticed the wrinkles and bruises on his parents' hands. Then he realized that these hands that worked

hard every day enabled him to study and progress in life.

The next day the director noticed tears in the young man's eyes when he inquired about the assignment. The young man replied, "I now know what appreciation is. Without my parents, I would not be who I am today." The director proudly announced, "This is what I am looking for in a manager. You are hired."

This touching story resonates a strong message. Love is not selfish and does not look for its own gain. Love, if it is true, is ready to sacrifice everything for the good of the other. Parents are generally motivated by this intense love for their children and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their future. Johann von Goethe summarized the responsibility of parents towards their children beautifully in his quote, "There are two things children should get from their parents: roots and wings." Both of these are results of love and therefore parents should essentially give their children love.

3) Finally, the church expects parents to become **EDUCATORS** of their children. *Familiaris Consortio* says, "The task of giving education is rooted in the primary vocation of married couples to participate in God's creative activity: by begetting in love and for love a new person who has within himself or herself the vocation to growth and development, parents by that very fact take on the task of helping that person effectively to live a fully human life... The right and duty of parents to give education is essential... it is

original and primary... irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others" (FC, #36).



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Pope Francis succinctly spoke on this issue during a general audience: "Today we consider the vocation of families to educate their children, to raise them in the profound human values which are the backbone of a healthy society. This educational mission, essential as it is, nowadays encounters a variety of difficulties. Parents spend less time with their children and schools are often more influential than families in shaping the thinking and values of the young. Our children need sure guidance in the process of growing in responsibility for themselves and others. Christian communities are called to support the educational mission of families. They do this above all by living in fidelity to God's word, cultivating faith, love and patience. Jesus himself was raised in a family; when he tells us that all who hear the word of God and obey are his brothers and sisters, he reminds us that for all their failings, our families can count on his inspiration and grace in the difficult but rewarding vocation of educating their children." □