

GOD AND THE FAMILY

by Ian Pinto, sdb

A woman was asked by a full-time volunteer to join an organization. "I am sorry," she replied, "but I don't have the time." "Are you that busy?" she was asked. "As a matter of fact, I belong to another group and am Co-President along with my husband, and I take care of most of the work, and my work doesn't leave me any free time." "Really, and what's the purpose of your organization?" "Its sphere of activity is very great: it is devoted to the promotion of Christian life, the rearing and training of children, their subsistence and hygiene, the spread of culture and other related goals." "What's the name of that organization," came the response, with a deep sense of admiration, "I've never heard of it!" "That's quite possible" said the woman, "It's called *the family*."

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

The genesis of a family, within the Christian context, is when a man and a woman unite themselves in marriage. What distinguishes Christian families from other families and characterizes them, is the Christian spirit. Only the family that is formed and nurtured according to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and of His Church can be described as a Christian family.

The Old Testament begins with the story of a family, the story of God creating the family of Adam and Eve. The first two chapters



of Genesis which speak of the Creation of human beings uphold the greatness and dignity of family life. "Let us make man in our own image and likeness... He created them male and female... and blessed them... be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:26-28); these statements regarding the creation of human beings clearly asserts that the family is divinely instituted. God not only creates and unites man and woman but blesses their family life and commissions them to fruitfulness. God created the family in His image and likeness. The image and likeness of God is love (1 Jn 4:10). Then the basis of the family must also be love.

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, writes, "God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love. He called him at the same time for love... Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and res-

ponsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being" (FC, 11).

The Holy Family of Nazareth stands at the centre of the New Testament. The covenant in the Old Testament is made to the family of Israel and it is to this family that the Messiah is promised. God chose to incarnate himself in order to save the world and be born in a simple, ordinary Jewish family. Jesus began revealing the immense love of God the Father through a family. He lived in the family, obedient and submissive to His own parents. Under their care he learnt human values and grew up in wisdom and stature. Possibly, he even learnt about the Divine at the knees of his parents. The Holy Family was devout followers of God, as is visible from their lifestyle described by the Gospel writers.

The Church in the New Testament began and grew up in the family. It is in families that the early Christians gathered for *the breaking of the bread* and sharing (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 12:12). So it is plausible to state that the early Churches were the families and the houses of early Christians (Acts 16:15; Rom 16:5; Philem 2; Col 4:15).

GIVING GOD TO KIDS

Helping children from the very earliest years to develop a really meaningful relationship with God is not only important but also vital. As per Canon Law, it is the obligation of parents to educate their children in the faith (Canon 226.2). It states: "It is therefore primarily the res-

ponsibility of Christian parents to ensure the Christian education of their children in accordance with the teaching of the Church." The Church emphasizes the important role of parent's vis-à-vis their children. They are primarily responsible not just for the child's physical and spiritual needs but also her/his cultural, social, intellectual and other needs.



A mother was teaching the rudiments of religion to her four children. One day, at the end of the lesson, she said to them with profound tenderness: "How happy I would be if one of you would become a saint!" The youngest threw himself into his mother's arms, and said: "Don't worry, mother. I'll be a saint." The child kept his word; he became a great Pope and a great saint: Saint Peter Celestine. One of the best gifts parents can give their children is the gift of faith.

Spirituality comes naturally to most kids. From a young age, they feel a connection to other living creatures. They have no trouble believing in things they can't see, and they're intrigued by God and religion. Preschoolers think it's fun to say grace before a meal, and grade-schoolers eagerly speculate about whether their favourite cartoon character will go to heaven when he/she dies. But that doesn't

mean kids really understand what religion is all about. "You need to bring spirituality into your everyday life, not just check it off your list when you drop your kid off at Sunday school," says Mimi Doe, coauthor of *10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting*. Centuries of experience have shown that a strong spiritual foundation can be central to a happy, purposeful, and ethical life.

PICTURING GOD

God must not be presented as a bearded Santa Claus who gifts everything and anything we ask for; neither must He be seen as a despotic father, waiting to pounce on any wrongdoing. God must be presented in terms of love, mercy, joy, understanding, warmth, beauty and peace. Children must be reassured that though God cannot be seen, He is there all the time, assisting, caring, listening and co-operating with us. Children must also be shown that God needs us. This is a wonderful and inspiring thought to develop. A young mother was once asked by her daughter: "How could God need me, hasn't he got everything he wants?" And she narrated the prayer of St. Theresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which his love looks out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses men now."

God loves people through me. He may want very much that

someone be loved today. I can refuse to let him work through me today since he respects my free choice. What a tremendous responsibility I have, being able to love as Christ loved, and also being in the position that I can refuse the commands of the Creator of love. Parents who talk to their children like this can inspire in them feelings of the tremendous possibilities inherent in each human being. Each one can change the world and a little love can make everything better.

It is also good to help them see the small ways in which they can bring God's love to other people. Everybody can play a part in creating God's Kingdom of love here on earth. Simple things like helping your brother or sister get ready for bed; bringing daddy's slippers to him when he comes home tired from work; helping mommy set and clear the table at meal time; sharing your tiffin with a classmate who didn't bring anything; befriend the girl who is unpopular at school because everyone thinks she is fat and dull.

Children must know that loving is hard and it takes trouble and sacrifice to do things for the people we love. They must also experience the happiness of doing so. Pain and self-sacrifice can be fruitful and sweet when they are made part of love. When a mother comes home from the shopping and finds the tea ready and the kitchen tidy and clean, she smiles and hugs her children and tells them how much she appreciates their love for her, and how really good it makes her

feel to see them turning out to be such caring people. Her warm appreciation more than repays them for the trouble they went through.

Becoming a Praying Family: Teaching Our Kids to Pray



PRAYING TOGETHER

One of the basic requirements of Christian life is prayer. St Paul invites us to "pray without ceasing and give thanks to God at every moment" (1 Thess 5:17-18). Prayer should never be turned into a formality or a chore. It is the glue that keeps a family united and the instrument of blessing and sanctification. Jesus, who has promised to be present when two or three gather in prayer in His name, enters into every family and sanctifies it when they pray together. "Far from being a form of escapism from everyday commitments, prayer constitutes the strongest incentive for the Christian family to assume and comply fully with all its responsibilities as the primary and fundamental cell of human society. Thus the Christian family's actual participation to the fidelity and intensity of the prayer with which it is united with the fruitful vine that is Christ the Lord" (FC, 62).

It's important for every member to learn to be cheerful, spon-

aneous, and relaxed in the presence of God. If a family kneels down in the evening, there could be a formal prayer to start with, and then each member of the family could, if he/she wished, say aloud his own personal prayer, a simple talking to God, thanking him for the good things of the day, asking him for the needs of tomorrow, requesting his grace or healing on certain individuals, and telling him of special plans. This is a wonderful platform to encourage children to develop a familiar relationship with God. When I look back at my life, I realize that it was such prayer that helped me develop a healthy relationship with God that eventually blossomed into a religious vocation and vocation to the priesthood.

Endless are the opportunities for bringing God to children, and children to him, but it is our own witness more than our words, or our own obvious love of God and of our neighbor, more than the rules we make, which are the most worthwhile contribution to the faith of today's young people. If a family is living in the presence of God there need not be formal prayer everyday for the members to encounter God. It is possible to meet God in each other. □

