

- Children are required to give material and human support to their parents when they are old, infirmed or distressed. In this way they honour their parents respecting both their human dignity and the way in which their parents 'image' divine fatherhood.

The duties of parents

'Parents must regard their children as children of God and respect them as human persons' (CCC 2222).

Parents do not own children – they are gifted to them out of love. With this gift comes the responsibility to provide sound moral education and spiritual formation. 'Parents must regard their children as children of God and respect them as human persons' (CCC 2222). This means that parents are called to properly



discipline but not provoke their children. Parents should also initiate children from an early age into the rich mystery of the Catholic Faith. As their children progress to adulthood, parents should avoid unduly pressuring them in the choices that they make concerning career or spouse - although this does not preclude them from giving 'judicious advice'. With parenthood comes the duty to pass on to children values that will become their 'good habits of life' – their virtues. The value of accepting responsibility and of persevering in times of difficulty can most effectively be learned through witness. When children see mum and dad persisting in their efforts they learn what it is to be courageous and self-sacrificing. When they observe their parents resisting the temptation to 'follow the crowd' they begin to understand that to withstand peer pressure is to become one's own person. Sometimes a mother or father needs to step back and allow a child to 'take a risk' so they can also learn the true value of fortitude. Children primarily learn how to be temperate and gracious by watching how their parents show respect for one another and respond to situations. That is why being respectful, polite, slow to anger and quick to forgive are important virtues for parents. Parents also need to be willing to have fun with their kids through games and family experiences. This helps children appreciate that a balanced infusion of fun is important if they are to fully flourish. Finally, 'by knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them'(CCC 2223). Parents have a duty to ensure that their children realise that dad and mum are also under the same divine authority.

The Family – where to now?

'The future of humanity passes by way of the family' (Saint John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio).

Since the family is the 'first and vital cell of society', one might equally ask the question: 'The society – where to now?' The public recognition of sexual complementarity, the regulation of human sexuality and the promotion of marriage and family are essential for the common good. These are the ways in which societies provide for the generation, nurture, education, moral formation, shelter and healthcare of their younger citizens. They are also fundamental to the development of a healthy culture.

For Christians, marriage brings more because it is also a living sacrament. Christian marriage has always been family-focused and has recognised that children are a great gift from God. Catholic parents are called to assist one another on a path to holiness and to strive to raise up saints within a domestic church. It is through the family that we gain a glimpse of the truth about being in a relationship with a loving God who is also a communion of persons. The family also helps us sense the infinite goodness of God who gives us the strength to be reconciled and to forgive – to try again. And Christian marriage and family present us with a vision of authentic love - one that is enduring, faithful, fruitful and freely given.

The Extraordinary Synod to be held in October 2014 on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family will challenge us personally. This is because implementing genuine pastoral responses will require us to do three things: to joyfully proclaim the truth of the Gospel of the family and the great gift of children; to explore opportunities for mercy and forgiveness in our own family and within the broader Church community; and to grow in our willingness to conform our personal lives to the will of God. It would be good to keep all those involved at the Synod in our prayers. ■

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways is the language of Christianity itself familial?
2. What duties does society have to the family?
3. How do the duties of parents and children reflect God's plan for humanity?
4. Why do Christians have a particular obligation to support marriage and family and the great gift of children?

Bibliography: Augustine. *Of the Good of Marriage*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm>>. Eberstadt, Mary. *How the West Really Lost God*. Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2013. Kreeft, Peter. *Catholic Christianity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001. Stenson, James. *Lifeline – The Religious Upbringing of Your Children*. Scepter Publishers, 1996.

Church documents: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Strathfield: St Pauls, 2000. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981.

Chris Meney is the Director of the Life, Marriage and Family Centre in the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney. He has degrees in science, education and arts as well as Masters in Bioethics from the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family. He has been married to Mary Clare for 30 years and has 9 children. During October 2014, Chris will attend the Extraordinary Synod on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family to be held in Rome.



THE MUSTARD SEED
BOOKSHOP

For Books & Media on the Family

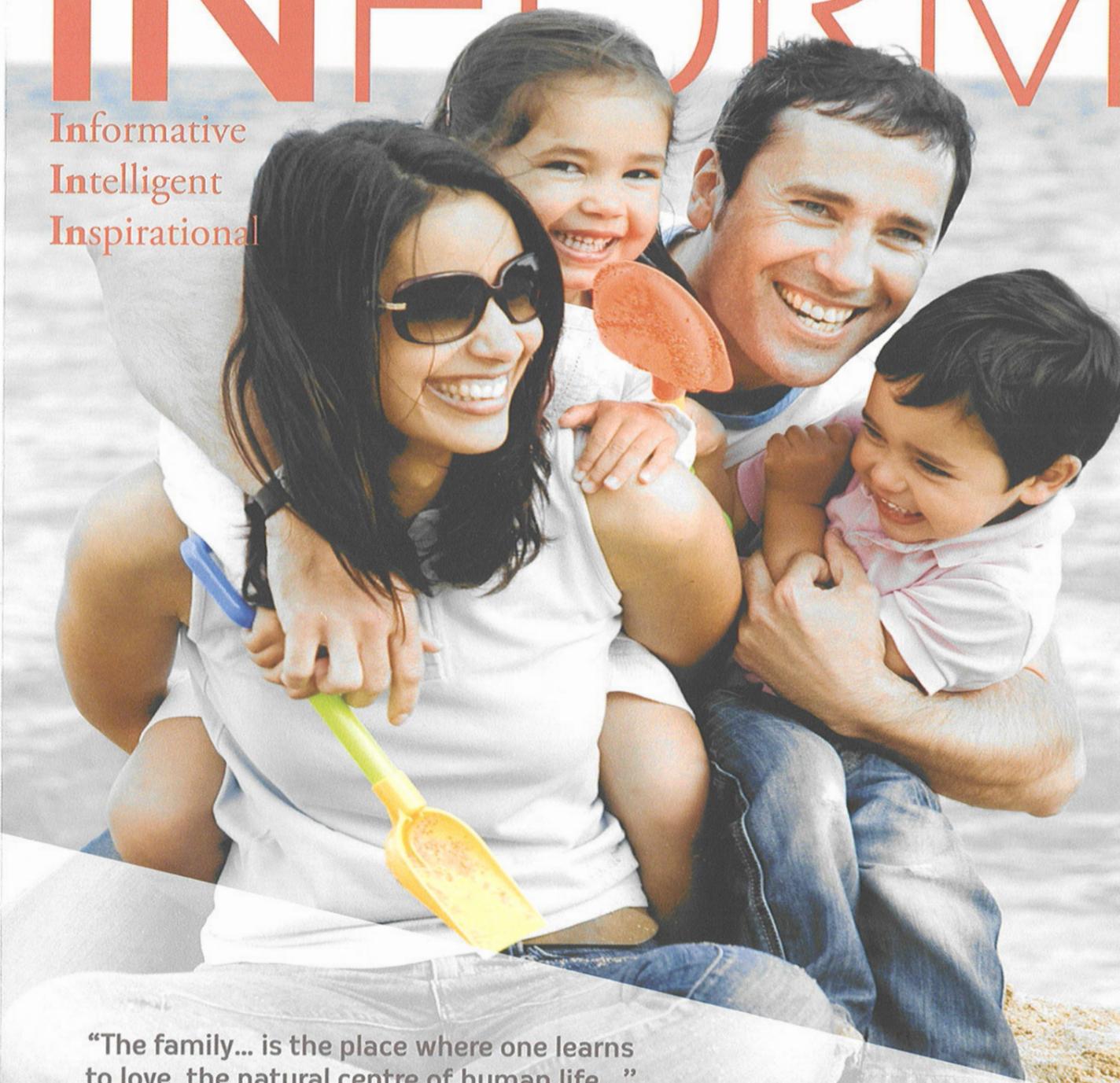
Ph 02 9646 9000

Store 3 Keating Street, Lidcombe 2141

www.mustardseed.org.au

INFORM

Informative
Intelligent
Inspirational



"The family... is the place where one learns to love, the natural centre of human life..."

– Pope Francis

THE SYNOD, THE FAMILY AND THE FUTURE

152

In October 2014, the Extraordinary Synod on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation will take place. In this article, **Chris Meney** explores the nature of the family and its importance in the Christian life and society.

Introduction

In October 2014, Pope Francis has convened an Extraordinary Synod on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation. Following a substantial response from Catholics everywhere to a recent questionnaire there is considerable expectation about what might happen on completion. This Synod will be followed by a General Synod on the family in 2015. Much of the recent discussion has been around the circumstances of the divorced and remarried and some have suggested that changes in Church teaching are in the wind. But this is not a doctrinal Synod. Its approach is pastoral and its focus is on the family not exclusively on marriage.

The working document for the Synod outlines three main areas for discussion:

- How the Gospel of the family can be preached today,
- How the Church's pastoral care program might better respond to contemporary challenges, and
- How to assist parents in promoting a mentality of openness to life and in the upbringing of their children.

There seems to be a growing awareness that without a renewed commitment to having and raising children, the domestic church will remain under substantial strain and consequently, so will the Catholic Church more broadly. In her most recent book, *How the West Really Lost God*, Mary Eberstadt argues convincingly that it is not just religious decline that results in family decline but that the reverse is also true. She proposes that they are like 'the double helix of society each dependant on the strength of the other for successful reproduction' and that children tend to 'make parents more inclined toward belief in the infinite - to a supernatural realm that is somehow higher and less well-understood than this one'. Most importantly she affirms that the language of Christianity itself is familial and that without the family the Christian story would be lost in translation. The Holy Family narrative in particular tells us much about the nature of motherhood and fatherhood and the acceptance of children as gifts from a loving God.

The fundamental point seems to be that we need to start taking the natural family seriously if we want to grow in our relationship with God and encourage others to do the same. The special nature of family life draws us towards a radical self-giving for the good of others and a willingness to accept what is offered. This can at times be very challenging but it assists us greatly in the growth of our personal relationship with Christ.

What do we mean when we talk of the Family?

'Marriage and family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children' (Catechism of the Catholic Church (henceforth CCC), 2201).

The family is not something that was invented by the Church. It is a very human experience and it has been the mainstay of successful societies for millennia. The family consists of a man and a woman united in marriage together with their children (CCC 2202). While the ultimate origin of the family is from the plan of God, the more immediate origin is from a man and a woman freely choosing to unite as 'one flesh' and with a willing desire to express all the constitutive elements of a family. These include fidelity, permanence and an openness to the gift

of new life. Two essential reasons reflect the 'why' of the family: 'Marriage and family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children' (CCC 2201). Since spouses become 'one flesh' they are called to respect and love each other as if they were one body. The gift of children is the fruit of this spousal love and husbands and wives should respond so that their children regard them as persons who always 'speak the truth with love' (Eph 4:15).

Passing on Truth

'The family is the community in which from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honour God, and make good use of freedom' (CCC 2207).

It is in the family that we take our first steps in search of Truth. It is within the family community children learn that right and wrong, good and bad, are not simply arbitrary constructs. They realise that parents want them to avoid habitual dishonesty so that they will become trustworthy. Good parenting demands that we teach children that faithfulness and chastity are in keeping with human dignity and that promiscuity is a fraud. Above all, they should be encouraged to be prudent in their judgments and to form their consciences properly. This is because a properly formed conscience is oriented towards Truth. Within the family we are challenged to accept the need to practise self-discipline and self-mastery so we can understand true freedom. Parents help their children to realise that self-indulgence and selfishness ultimately limits and enslaves them. Within all this, mum and dad have a responsibility to always encourage their children and to give good example to them. In this way families produce men and women of character and virtue who are able to enrich the community and the wider society.

The Family has priority over the state

'Man is by nature more inclined to live as a couple than to associate politically, since the family is something that precedes and is more necessary than the state' (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics).

The natural family existed before the state and has priority over the state in terms of rights. Aristotle noted that 'the family is something that precedes and is more necessary than the state' and Saint Augustine described marriage as 'the first natural bond of human society' which enables the melding of a society through its children. The reason that the state exists is to foster the good of families and of individuals. Since the family is 'the original cell of social life...larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere in its >

The family is not something that was invented by the Church. **It is a very human experience and it has been the mainstay of successful societies for millennia.** The family consists of a man and a woman united in marriage together with their children (CCC 2202).



life' (CCC 2207, 2209). This means that the parents' role as the 'first educators' of their children must always be respected. It is parents who have ultimate responsibility for moral and spiritual formation and the development of virtues in their children. Some parental responsibilities cannot be entirely devolved to others. An example is the education of children in human sexuality. This is a role which must be assumed by parents and in which other institutions of a like mind can assist. But it is primarily a parental responsibility.

The duties of the society to the Family

'The family is 'the original cell of social life...larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere in its life' (CCC 2207 and 2209).

All of us have a responsibility to build a social environment which protects and nurtures the family and enables it to flourish. This calls us to respect the rights of parents and to enact laws which are supportive of marriage and family.

- Parents have the right to bring their children up in accordance with the family's moral and religious convictions. Hence, society has an obligation to assist in providing opportunities for schooling which are consistent with these convictions.
- As a society we should work to protect marriage and reject reinterpretations of marriage which attack its true meaning. To permit other forms of relationships to gain equal credence and acceptance is to undermine marriage. Marriage is constituted by its exclusiveness, complementarity and orientation to life.
- Society is called to ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for spouses to gain employment, to welcome children and to adequately provide for them. Society also has a particular obligation to protect children from the inherent and corrupting influences of drugs, pornography, prostitution etc (CCC 2211).

The Family and faith

'The family teaches children that they are loved equally and unconditionally. They experience love not as the world loves them, for what they can 'do', but rather as God loves them, for who they 'are'.

The family is the usual way in which each of us learns to develop

a relationship with God. It is 'the community in which, from childhood one can...begin to honour God' (CCC 2207). It has been called the 'domestic church' and it is where we learn the value of the Christian life's most urgent demand: deep and profound charity. This is a love that is of the very nature of God. Within the family children learn of how God's love for us is revealed through the sacrificial act of Jesus Christ. They also learn why the Mass is so central and how the Eucharist enables us to continue God's work in us and through us. Through the family children discover that this totally self-sacrificial act of love is not just a historical event or an abstract ideal. It is a concrete reality which their parents reveal to their children by continually 'offering themselves up' out of love. The family teaches children that they are loved equally and unconditionally. They are loved whether they are healthy or sick, 'normal' or 'handicapped', intelligent or a struggler. They experience love not as the world loves them, for what they can 'do', but rather as God loves them, for who they 'are'. The dynamics of family life often require the devotion of significant time, care, resources and support to different members at various stages. Such decisions have their roots in a deep and abiding respect for the inherent dignity of each family member. In a very special way, children learn that love of God and love of neighbour have become one: 'As you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40).

The duties of children

'The divine fatherhood is the source of human fatherhood; this is the foundation of the honour owed to parents' (CCC 2214).

The commandment to 'honour thy father and mother' is not some sort of Old Testament nicety. It actually calls children to respond generously with an active appreciation of what their parents have done for them. There are basic duties that children owe their parents.

- Children are called to show gratitude to them for the gift of life and for the parental labours that have enabled the children to grow 'in stature, wisdom and grace'.
- Children also need to show both respect and obedience. 'As long as a child lives at home with his parents, the child should obey his parents in all they ask of him when it is for his good or that of the family' (CCC 2217). The scope of this obedience ceases when children leave home but the respect owed to parents never ceases because it is linked with respect for God himself. Children should also be helped to respect and love their brothers and sisters. >

