CONFLICT IN THE FAMILY

By MARY DUNN

I WONDER whether many of us harbour a secret fear that other families are co-existing with far less aggravation and shouting than our own. We measure ourselves against what we know of other households, and worry that we may match up rather badly. In my early days as a Marriage Guidance Counsellor I would catch myself in the midst of a blazing row at home, my face distorted by tears and extreme rage, my composure lost, and wonder what my clients would think, who see me as cool and competent in the realm of good relationships. Some have worried that the neighbours might hear their rows, and here am I, audible from the next town. Yet, on the occasions when we witness the domestic upset of another family—a row in a shop, or a mother 'going over the top' at a small child—it seems to be so much more unpleasant than anything that happens at home that it can give us a temporary warm feeling of superiority. Other peoples' anger seems to be somehow less acceptable than our own. If all of this strikes a chord, it is an indication that the level of conflict in a family is an issue which arouses both guilt, shame and smugness, all at the same time. What is hardest is to recognize the difference between 'normal', acceptable levels of aggression and abnormal ones.

Psychologists are divided in their theories about the origins of aggression in the human personality. The psychoanalytic tradition regards it as innate, part of the blueprint for survival which we all have from birth. Behaviourists see aggression as learned, and therefore capable of modification and unlearning by systems of reward.

These divergent views are very crucial to any discussion of the area. From a therapeutic point of view, working with a family which presents aggression as its problem, there is a difference between aiming to eradicate all conflict from the scene by means of reinforcement and restructuring the family's interaction into appropriate responses. If aggression is innate to the human personality, it follows that in its acceptable form it is a survival mechanism

parallel to 'fight or flight' in the animal kingdom. Since few of us use anger in order to ensure basic survival within a family, why is it such a feature of family life?

I suggest the answer is that there is more to survival than staying alive. There is mental and emotional survival, and beyond that there is the process of growth and development for which the family provides fertile soil for both children and adults. Many middle-class mothers have set out to provide their young children with an atmosphere in which destructive violence is absent. Many of them have found that their children have incorporated guns into their play, in spite of their best efforts to exclude them. Children deal with their absence by using a twig! In my experience, parents who try desperately never to raise their voices or physically punish are driven to the very extreme of their endurance by children who seem to be insecure, who seem to be prisoners of their own egocentricity. In the famous series of experiments conducted in children's holiday camps by Sherif (1969), where he constructed teams and monitored levels of aggression under conditions of competitive tasks, it was found that the aggression preceded the competitive tasks! The case for arguing that aggression is innate seems to me to be conclusive, but there are many who would disagree.

The plaster-saint image of the Holy Family (where never a cross word was spoken) chooses to forget the irritation in the parent's words at the finding in the Temple. Even with perfect people, there would seem to be moments where priorities clash.

So what constitutes a 'normal family'? Much psychological knowledge in the past was based upon observations of the sick. Quite recently more emphasis has been placed upon the healthy and resilient. Unfortunately this means finding a yardstick upon which to base measurement of success or failure, which is in itself problematic. However, the consensus seems to be that the healthy family is the one which can cope with change. Such a family has the flexibility to encompass and absorb the various stages of growth of each of its members, while remaining supportive but also challenging. As in any relationship the family is dynamic, because of the processes which each of its members is undergoing. And it is this very dynamism, with its challenges, which most often provokes conflict. Therefore it would seem that the flexibility which is the hallmark of the healthy family inherently involves conflict. If we say that conflict is necessary in healthy relationships, what

do we say about those families where, genuinely, 'never a cross word is spoken'?

If clients tell me that they had a totally happy childhood, I am suspicious. If they add that they never heard their parents argue and were never punished, I begin to think that either they have a faulty memory, or that there was a great deal of denial in the air, with maybe a handy scapegoat who did all the 'bad behaviour' on behalf of the other members of the family. The paradox is that such 'sweetness and light' families (and they do exist) do not produce children who grow up to be constructive, peace-loving, 'nice' people. They are people who are unable to cope with the world and its challenges, because the only safe place to be is back home. They are paralyzed by the possibility that somebody might shout at them and that they will be destroyed. More seriously, they are sometimes plagued with depressive illness because the normal irritations and resentments of life remain locked away inside, since to express them would go against the family taboo that says that anger is wrong. Added to the family is the feeling that nobody else harbours murderous negative feelings, and therefore that they are as truly dreadful as they always privately thought they were. I suggest that when Christ said 'your sins are forgiven', he was using a form of shorthand which referred partly to releasing people from just such a prison. Salvation must mean being freed from our own low self-esteem and paralyzing negative feelings.

In addition to denial, Freud listed projection as one of the defence mechanisms. This is a familiar concept in family and marital pathology, and I was sceptical about it when I read about it, but I am now a believer because I have seen it so often in practice. The interaction of a family is so intimate that the members share emotional states, sometimes passing them around, sometimes focusing goodness and badness as labels on to particular individuals. Domestic strife has been analyzed in some cases as a triangular game (played by at least three, but also more players) in which the basic positions are victim, persecutor and rescuer. In order for an individual to play his role he must have two others to play the other two, just as a child/adolescent role must have an adult/parent to kick against. An individual may get stuck with the victim role and play it constantly, but a more enduring form of the game is one where the three roles are passed around, so that no individual ever becomes familiar with one before he is confused by being

thrust into another. An easily recognizable version would be the situation in which a mother is at her wits' end with a child (victim) by the time father comes home in the evening. Her initial greeting to her husband is a catalogue of woes (change from persecutor to victim) at which point her world-weary husband lashes out at the child (change from rescuer to persecutor). The child turns on his mother with the fury of the victim of injustice turned persecutor, and she in turn attacks her husband for being too heavy-handed . . . and so it goes on. Any unwary therapist called in to such a situation finds himself sucked in and plays each role in turn. This is an endless game which features for some of the time in most families, and is sometimes developed to the status of a way of life. It is a very subtle form of projection because no one person can be identified as playing a constant role. Neither are they allowed their own choice of behaviour since they find themselves doing and saying things which are not in character. All that anybody knows is that the atmosphere is hostile and that they become involved in conflict in spite of all their intentions not to do so. The origin of the conflict and the exact reason for the row are totally obscured. All this is complicated because issues will be raised which are far removed from the point. The game therefore succeeds by removing any stable landmarks from the scene and facing people with a landscape of uncharted and hazardous obstacles.

A simpler form of projection is where the negative feelings of a family are loaded on to one member, who obliges by exhibiting antisocial behaviour, temper tantrums, delinquency and sometimes more serious symptoms than these. Frequently in a family with battling parents, the child discovers that the only thing which unites Mummy and Daddy is to draw their joint hostility on to himself. This is a situation akin to self-sacrifice, since the unity of his parents takes precedence over his own self-esteem. Children are loath to cast their parents in the role of 'baddy', and rather than do this will elect to fill the 'baddy' seat themselves, since things are not right and clearly somebody must be bad. Projection serves the psychological purpose of putting bad feelings, which are a frightening and unpleasant part of oneself, out on to others. Paranoia is only one extreme form. It is readily recognizable when nearly all the contacts in a person's life history appear to have been dishonest, evil and unreliable. This is contrary to common sense and therefore one wonders about projection.

Projection is thought however to exist in its 'normal' form in the choice of life partners. The process of choosing one's partner for life is very complex, and many couples become aware in later life of factors in their 'marital fit' of which they were unaware at the time of marriage, and which must have existed in the realms of unconscious 'vibrations'. The partner seems to be chosen on the grounds that he/she represents the 'other side' of the person's personality (Jung's concept of the 'shadow'). For example, a vivacious, extrovert, quick-tempered girl, marries a quiet, introvert, easy-going man. At a crisis point in the marriage she can say that what attracted her to her husband was his calm stability. Now it is the very quality which she finds boring, and irritation is aroused which he stoically refuses to match by having rows. They have each represented an extreme for one another and have become polarized. They are not at liberty to incorporate into themselves any of the features for which the other holds the copyright. They each blame the other for manifesting the suppressed half of a personality. The husband can be helped to recognize the anger within himself, having discovered where the message originated which totally excluded it; he can take responsibility for its expression. This may well involve re-discovering other elements of his child, such as fun-loving irresponsibility, permission to enjoy himself alongside his work-based serious nature. His wife may then find that she is released from playing a constant tape of dissatisfaction and irritation, and discover in herself not only a calmer, responsible, less hysterical person but also some healing humour. Both are being more real, having found in their marriage that flexibility which promotes personal growth. Is this not one of the greatest graces of the sacrament, that from a fragmented, conflict-ridden situation, arises a unique opportunity for two people to be more whole than either could have been alone? This may sound over-simplistic; it is a summary of months of work which happens for many couples in the natural course of things and, for a few, with the help of a professional. When the projections are identified and taken back into the original psyche, the conflicts to which they gave rise cease to be destructive. Notice that conflict itself is not the problem—it is the failure of each to own his or her own feelings. (In our ideal relationship, aggression will never be eliminated, but it will be expressed appropriately.) Christ brought about the re-absorption of projections in the vivid scene of the woman taken in adultery. With all the badness heaped upon

the woman, he demanded that each accusor take responsibility for his own portion of it and then re-examine the problem from the new standpoint. We all know the result.

In my home, with four children aged between eight and fourteen, a large percentage of family time is spent in conflict! Indeed, periods of constructive exchange of ideas sometimes feel like islands in a sea of bickering! I think it is possible to identify several different layers in this texture of mutual hostility. At its most superficial and frequent, such conflict amounts to physical and verbal tussling, comparable to the rough-and-tumble play of lion cubs. I include those conversations in which one child is clearly provoking another for the enjoyment of watching the other's arousal and explosion. Provocation is a skill which demands quick thinking to know the key word in a sentence which, when misunderstood, will inevitably enrage. The more skilful can achieve the same end by a sceptical look, or a shrug or a snigger. (The sheer artistry of this play, however, can only be admired on days when the parents are themselves feeling rested, calm and benign.) It serves the purpose of developing the ability to survive mentally, just as the aggressive play of lion cubs equips them for self-defence in the face of a predator. It also has a side-effect in the relationship between siblings once they reach adulthood. A wife may fear her husband's anger, but his sister doesn't! She has had the experience of drawing his fire from an early age, and she knows that she can handle it. As a result a sibling can be the most challenging person around for an adult.

The next layer is a more serious form of arguing whereby the natural egocentricity of a child is constantly clashing with that of his siblings. The dictionary defines conflict as 'opposition of incompatible wishes'. This is a tame, bookish phrase to describe what happens when two children want to watch different television channels or play with the same toy! It is an exhausting process for parents to come up with fair solutions to their endless wrangles. At the end of a day spent organizing 'turns' and just resolutions as to which child has the greater claim to the granting of his wishes, one can sometimes feel that Solomon had it easy! This must be a good introduction to industrial relations, which often have the same feel, even the same catch-phrases: 'he started it' . . . 'John has got another packet of crisps, does that mean I can have a Mars Bar?' Clearly the purpose of this level of conflict is to learn to live in society, claiming one's own space in such a way

that we do not infringe the space of others. Robin Skynner and John Cleese, in their book *Families and how to survive them*, see it as a progression from the infant position of omnipotence, with the ego like a balloon of infinite proportions, to a gradual tailoring of the balloon to a smaller and smaller size. The ego ceases to be the only reality in sight and begins to recognize the rights of others, thereby progressively getting itself into perspective. This process is not easy in adulthood, but its main battlefield takes place in childhood. The role of the parent is one of containment. The child needs to feel that if all else fails, a referee can be applied to. The parent communicates that, within certain boundaries, it is OK to battle it out. I once found myself at a loss to establish a fair regime for a group of six badminton players, of indifferent skill, in my garden, none of whom was willing to play the youngest member, who always missed! After days of tears and verbal abuse, and on my part complete helplessness to do more than comfort, to my amazement one of the children found the solution. It was a complicated league table whereby everybody played everybody and finally produced the back-yard champion!

Quite rarely, these situations proceed to the next level, which is much more unpleasant and frightening to the children. This happens when the referee is out of earshot and the row escalates to the level of physically hurting one another, with no natural resolution in sight. At this point the containment role has failed and can only be restored by a lot of stroking of wounded egos.

Conflict between parents and children also falls into distinct categories. Many adults will recognize that a proportion of their irritation originates in their own fatigue and stress rather than in objective wrong-doing on the part of the child. It is a source of great sadness to realize that you have taken out your bad mood on a person who is not allowed to tell you so. Yet this is one of the ways in which children learn that their parents are not perfect, and then learn to tolerate their own imperfections. A further source of conflict is establishing that adults have their own needs and space and are not permanent slaves to the younger members of the household. This is important, not only for the survival of the adults, but also in training children to recognize the boundaries of relationships. They need to know that there is an imaginary line between 'me' and 'not me', in order to make the progressive separation from parents to being independent people. Failure to do this results in making relationships of dependency in later life,

and a constant search for parent figures. In the family, the parents may need to weather a storm to establish a balance between the demands of children and their own rights and needs.

What can we say about the discernment of 'normal' levels of conflict and 'abnormal' ones? It is helpful to recognize that we are not aiming for an ideal situation of no conflict. If this ever happened it would indicate static relationships, denial and repression of feelings. Only the members of a family can say when their level of aggression has become destructive and unacceptable to them, since each family has its own standards. However, there clearly are times when uncontrolled emotion is an indication that all is not well, and hopefully I have indicated some of the mechanisms which could be at work.

The theology of the family regards it as the primary unit of society, and of the Body of Christ. Just as the mechanisms of interaction and growth which I have described refer to the emotional and domestic dimensions of relationships, so they can be extended to the spiritual dimension. An incarnational approach means that all our human interactions are a reflection of the way in which the Church relates to Christ. In our collective relationship with Christ we are constantly faced with the need to allow some flexibility for one another's varying stages of spiritual growth. Many of us are at the stage of using the Church as a safe parental refuge, where we can deny our adult status and allow our decisions to be made for us in the absence of distressing conflict. We frequently project on to God aspects of our own damaged psyche—whether we see him as a benign Father Christmas figure, or as an unjust despot. Similarly, the process of evolving towards a state of wholeness in Christ is paralleled by the painful movement towards integration and reality in our close relationships. It is hard to conceive that one can happen without the other. The internal conflict of each individual will be reflected in his relationships as well as in his perception of God. If the relationship with Christ is real and dynamic, it will also contain conflict. I am therefore suggesting that a theology which assumes a bland atmosphere of stasis rather than dynamic growth is impoverished. It feeds on its own theoretical life, but bears little relation to daily living. When conflict is seen as the way in which we grow as fully human people it becomes crucial to our theology. Psychology and theology then have something very valuable to offer to one another. I suggest that family conflict is the pivotal concept between theory and

reality. When Christ saw the money-lenders in the Temple, he did not politely ask them to leave—he threw things! Our model of integrated living was not afraid of negative feelings. I think we can sometimes use 'charity' as an excuse for cowardice. If we refuse to challenge one another, we fail in charity because we use artificial niceness to avoid the effort and commitment involved in making possible one another's personal growth in Christ.