A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Family Life and the Sacramental Imagination

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Memorial Day, 2012. Our 34-year-old daughter, on a visit to Omaha over the extended weekend, pads down in her bare feet to the kitchen where I am boiling water for breakfast tea. She carries with her with our new grandchild. As she hoists little Evelyn up into a high chair and proceeds to spoon out the organic mango-green bean mélange she has carted with her from Minneapolis, I reflect that this daughter of ours has taken to parenting with admirable, if exhausted, good humour. Being a mother has taken her out of herself, formed and reformed her and drawn her best qualities to the fore: I recognise the experience, as it has been my own.

THIS BRIEF REFLECTION will consider family life through the lens of the sacramental imagination. To do so it will look at John Paul II's 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (from which the phrase a 'dialogue with God' is taken)[1]—among the most important recent magisterial documents to deal with family life—and consider it in light of two contrasting but, I hope, complementary, approaches to the issue of sacramentality within the Roman Catholic tradition. I undertake this reflection, culled from my own and others' lived experience, within that matrix, also informed by the insights of a variety of academic disciplines. All my experience as a wife, a mother, a spiritual director of twenty plus years, and a US teacher and scholar of the historical Catholic and Christian spiritual schools informs this reflection.[2]

[1] John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 4.50.

[2] This reflection is written from my perspective as a scholar of spirituality rather than specifically as a theologian, although I trust that the strands of spiritual wisdom that exist within the Catholic tradition upon which I draw may be useful to the greater theological enterprise. 'Spirituality', in the sense in which I am using the term, is not, then, simply a branch of theology (that is, to be paired up as moral and spiritual theology). Nor is it 'theology in walking shoes'. Nor is it identical with the academic field of practical theology, although in the event these fields often converge. The academic discipline of

The Way, 52/1 (January 2013), 55–64

Familiaris Consortio *(On the Family)*

Familiaris consortio *is an assigned reading for my short summer graduate course on family spirituality at Boston College. The cluster of pastoral ministry students who appear on the first class day to study together are a mixed group: older women religious on sabbatical who have worked for decades as family therapists, single childless young women of varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds who are training to be social workers, middle-aged parish ministers with children at home or children grown and flown. They plough dutifully through the late Pope's exhortation and find it at one and the same time inspiring and troubling. Its words conjure up a beautiful vision of the ideal family nested in the bosom of a gracious mother Church. Yet all their own families, their families of origin and the families with which they work seem not to fit into this picture.*

There is much to commend in *Familiaris consortio*, especially if one considers the long and ambivalent history of Christianity's views of family life, and in particular the dominant spiritual traditions that for centuries assumed that the life of 'perfection' was best achieved through celibacy. From theological hindsight, with the fourth-century words of St Jerome about the duties of the distracted wife and mother echoing in one's ears—'where amid all this is there room for the thought of God?'—one might say of the ideal Catholic Christian family today, 'you've come a long way, baby'.[3]

In addition, *Familiaris consortio* moves way beyond other modern documents directed towards marriage and family, notably Pius XI's *Casti connubii* of 1930,[4] which assumed male dominance and saw procreation as the primary—basically sole—goal of marriage. In contrast, John Paul II's exhortation acknowledges the spiritual value of married life as a arena for mutual sanctification, affirms the universal call to holiness,

spirituality, as it has come to be defined within the past twenty years, and within which I locate my own work, involves reflection upon *lived experience*. Academic spirituality is interdisciplinary and self-implicating, and affirms that any spiritual tradition is not generic but is rooted in the thought worlds of specific religious, cultural and ideological communities. Catholic Christian spirituality, then, has an intimate relationship with scripture, liturgical life and formal theology. On this see *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005) and *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, edited by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert (Mahwah: Paulist, 2006).

[3] St Jerome, 'Against Helvidius: The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, volume 6, *St Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 344–345.

[4] See Bernard Cooke, '*Casti connubii* to *Gaudium et spes*: The Shifting Views of Christian Marriage', in *Marriage in the Catholic Tradition: Scripture, Tradition and Experience*, edited by Todd A. Salzman, Thomas M. Kelly and John J. O'Keefe (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 109–114.

upholds the dignity of life, speaks of the intrinsic value of women, children and the elderly and, most importantly, places the family within a sacred and ecclesial context while affirming its evangelizing and social role. The document sees marriage and family as one of two fundamental ways of human loving that are intrinsic in the divine plan (celibacy is the other), and advances the long-held (at least since the twelfth century) idea that marriage is covenantal and a sacramental sign of Christ's union with the Church. So, there *is* much to recommend *Familiaris consortio* as a text and as a starting point for further theological insight.

In fact, *Familiaris consortio* has been fruitful for a number of current theologians whose work centres on marriage and family, notably Julie Hanlon Rubio in her two books *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* and *Family Ethics*.[5] In these she draws out in detail the implications of *Familiaris consortio*'s affirmation that the Christian family has a mission to participate in the social and political life of the world, and explores that in light of the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

Hanlon Rubio makes the point that papal documents such as this one intend to address the ideals to which Catholic Christians are called, and rarely speak of specific situations, including the contextual realities

[5] Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2003) and *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2010).

of particular families. This is germane to my students' discomfort with the magisterial statement. Nevertheless, I would contend that, even with its many theologically enriching insights and the opportunities it provides for further exploration, *Familiaris consortio* is also limiting to families in terms of nurturing a sacramental imagination—a task, I would argue, that is central to Catholic spiritual identity.

A Sacramental Imagination

Long ago, Augustine gave us a primer-level definition of the sacraments, stating that they are 'a visible signs of invisible grace'. It goes without saying that Catholicism is deeply imbued with a sense that the invisible is present, active and alive among us. This is perhaps one of the distinguishing elements of a Catholic way of seeing the world. It is evident in the importance of ritual life for Catholics.

> Catholicism is fundamentally a faith of ritual practice, that is to say, a religion whose core theology, individual believers' inner spiritual experiences, and a great variety of social, communal identities come alive preeminently through participation in and ownership of rite.[6]

The rites are implicitly sacramental: they assume that sacred presence is made available in space and time. Even beyond the seven 'big S' sacraments, Catholicism is imbued with a wider sense of the sacramental, of grace and gift that permeate the created order in many ways. Obvious examples are the insistence that prayer is heard and answered and the prevalence of 'sacramentals', those wonderful tactile objects and actions that provide a sense of the immediacy of grace. The widespread global practice of what have been deemed 'popular' devotions also attests to the deeply felt sacramental sensibility.

Nurturing a Sacramental Imagination

A sacramental imagination, which I contend is beneficial for the health and flourishing of Catholic family life, is nurtured in many ways.[7] One of these—and this is how *Familiaris consortio* proceeds—is through the

[6] *Practicing Catholic: Ritual, Body, and Contestation in Catholic Faith*, edited by Bruce T. Morrill, Joanna E. Ziegler and Susan Rogers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

[7] Of interest in this regard is a study of second- and third-generation Catholics in Southern California who, while they no longer engage in the devotional practices their immigrant forbears did, retain a heightened sacramental sensibility. See Mary Clark Moschella, *Living Devotions: Reflections on Immigration, Identity and Religious Imagination* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008).

explicit recognition by the ecclesial community that something (in this case marriage and family) is somehow a part of the divine plan that allows people to participate in and grow into the fullness of the 'civilisation of love' (to use the late Pope's own phrase), a reality that he states has its genesis and fulfilment in God's own nature and desire.

When marriage is acknowledged as one of the seven 'big S' sacraments, the institution is given a lustre and meaning that reveals to its participants the deeper significance of the union they inhabit. *Familiaris consortio* provides an ideal vision of marriage and family which may nurture an imagination that can see that God is indeed with us.[8] But this vision proceeds from 'above', as it were. Not only is it passed down from the hierarchy to the laity, but theologically *Familiaris consortio's* assumptions about the sacramentality of family life begin with an ideal vision that may be summarised in the following way. Marriage, as a sacrament, has a role to play in God's plan and a vision to which, by virtue of that role, it must witness. The way it witnesses is as a mutually self-giving, indissoluble male–female couple joined in a covenant with special responsibility for the procreation and education of children accomplished within a clearly defined moral framework of behaviour,

[8] On the ideal and real see Wendy M. Wright, *Living the Already but Not Yet: The Spiritual Life of the American Catholic Family* (Tulsa: U. of Tulsa P, 1993).

especially sexual behaviour. The ecclesial mission that the sacrament fulfils is to build up the Kingdom of God through familial life and love, and through the development of society as witnesses to the truth of God's plan.

However, I would contend that a sacramental imagination is nurtured from 'below' as well as from above. It is nurtured not only through the promulgation of an ideal but also through the affirmation that grace can be uncovered within any and all circumstances, moments and configurations of family life, that the incarnation and the paschal mystery unfold and are plumbed precisely through our conscious encounters with what is, as well as with what should be. I, as a scholar of spirituality and as a praying Christian, am concerned with this affirmation. Such an approach is expressed by the Christian humanist traditions, traditions most familiarly encountered in the Ignatian and the Salesian spiritual schools that had their genesis in the early modern period.[9]

In the mid twentieth century the Jesuit literary scholar William Lynch provided perhaps the most eloquent description of a Christian humanist perspective, and of the profoundly sacramental viewpoint it provides upon the created world. That imagination, in his words, has 'faith in the ability of the finite to lead somewhere'.[10] Another way of describing this imaginative approach is to say that the Infinite is encountered only in and through the finite, through what is. It is not simply that times and places are set aside to acknowledge the sacred reality, or that the platonic sacred might be encountered in designated time and space, but that that sacred presence cannot be experienced except in and through the material, the temporal and the concrete. There simply is no way to encounter God except through created media, which include the heart, mind and imagination of the human person. And this encounter cannot be always be confined within the bounded perimeters of the ideal.

The gift of the Christian humanist approach is that it nurtures the imagination expansively, extending the range of ways in which the divine encounter occurs, affirming the mysterious revelatory capacity of the particular, the unnoticed, the unacknowledged people, places and circumstances. It begins with reflected experience and the surprising

[9] On this see Wendy M. Wright, 'The Ignatian-Salesian Imagination and Familied Life', in *The Holy Family in Art and Devotion,* edited by Joseph F. Chorpenning (Philadelphia: St Joseph's UP, 1998), 104–108.
[10] William Lynch, 'The Imagination and the Finite', *Thought*, 33 (Summer 1958), 205–226.

eruption of gift and grace in the midst of lives that may be far from ideal. The ideal, while fully operative in this approach, is not necessarily always fixed in specific forms, patterns or formulas. This Christian humanist perspective allowed the Jesuit-trained Bishop Francis de Sales in the seventeenth century to announce in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* that a life of true devotion is not reserved for those 'separated from the world' but that 'it is an error, or rather a heresy to try to exclude the devout life from the soldier's regiment, the workman's shop, the court of rulers or the home of the married'.[11]

The Ideal and the Real

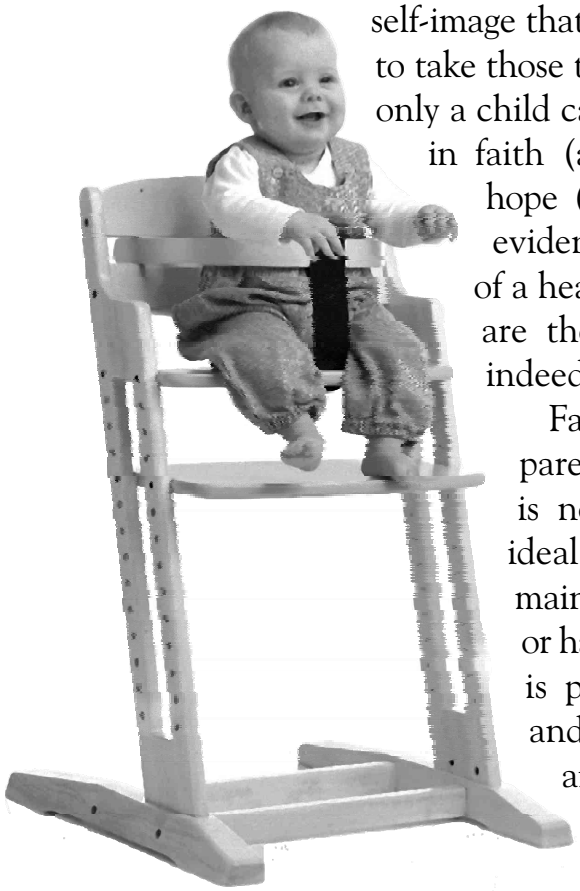
Several years ago I happened upon some surprising words by a well-meaning columnist in an East Coast diocesan paper. Presumably the writer desired to uphold the importance of an ideal family life for the proper raising of offspring. She was speaking of the admirable commitments of the saintly models Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, and ended her encomium with a shout of praise for their great parents who certainly knew how to raise their kids. Unfortunately this columnist had not done her homework, as neither Day nor Merton was raised in anything like an ideal home: Day's family was essentially non-practising and her mother fell into a post-natal depression after the birth of her last child, leaving Dorothy to care for the infant. Merton, from another non-religious home, lost his mother as a child and was shuttled about to various European boarding schools by his artist father, who died before the boy reached adulthood. Neither of her exemplary figures led anything like an exemplary youth. My thought at the time was that the assumptions of the columnist were interesting and very much in the mould of Familiaris consortio*: anything good and gracious must conform to the ideal scenario. I wondered if Merton and Day would be perceived by the writer as any less admirable if the reality of their family lives were genuinely taken into account.*

John Paul's exhortation places the ideal Christian family firmly within a larger framework of the Church and its mission. It *may* thus encourage a sense of meaning and purpose and possibility. All this is well and good. However, the approach breaks down in its ability to nurture the

[11] Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 1.3, translated by John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday Image, 1972), 44.

imagination when the ideal is not incarnated. In its final section on the pastoral care of families, *Familiaris consortio* lists what it calls 'difficult cases'. These include mixed marriages, irregular cases, trial marriages (cohabitation), free unions, civil marriages, persons separated and divorced, those divorced and remarried, ideologically divided families and so forth. The idea that there are 'difficult cases' implicitly bleeds over into those families who fail to realise the ideal vision in one way or another. From a pastoral standpoint, if one assumes the ideal as the norm, such difficult families are in need only of fixing. Certainly families need to be cared for—my social work and therapy students would agree. But they do not necessarily need care because they do not mirror the ideal. Beyond therapy and services, what families truly need is a new imagination: one that can see the grace and mystery of God working in their actual lives.

It has been the great humanist spiritual traditions that have encouraged me to imagine anew. Not by holding up an ideal but by making me attentive to the dynamics of the incarnation—God with us—and the paschal mystery—the generosity of other-centred love conquering death—within the fabric of the real. They have taught me to be open to the constant dying to my own self-preoccupation and self-image that is a challenge of family life. They have taught me to take those tremulous steps down the ladder of humility where only a child can lead. They have helped me to see that growth in faith (as radical commitment to an infinite horizon), hope (as the gift to breath out 'yes' when there is no evident reason to do so) and love (as the spaciousness of a heart broken open so wide that nothing is excluded) are the true measure by which I know that God is indeed with me.



Family life is sacramental not only within a two-parent family of scrupulously practising Catholics. It is not sacramental because it replicates a platonic ideal of family. It is not experienced as sacramental mainly because it has been accomplished 'correctly' or has been recognised as being 'correct'. Sacramentality is present within the messy, perplexing, wounding and healing dynamics between any family members among whom the growth and gift of love abide. Family life can take one to the extremes of joy

and of anguish. It can open one to wonder and, if one is willing, initiate one into the farthest reaches of compassion and the purifying waters of humility. This happens in families of all sorts.

The theologian Michael Lawler made this point some time ago when he located the essence of the Christian family not in a particular family form but in the quality of the lived relationships that pertain there.[12] *Familiaris consortio*, of course, speaks loudly about such loving relationships, but it links them tightly with specific forms and practices, especially in the area of sexuality. It is an odd, if understandable, fact, given John Paul II's devotional predilections, that *Familiaris consortio* ends with a lyric appeal to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as the embodiment of the civilisation of love who, in the Pope's words, 'glorified God in an incomparably exalted and pure way'.[13] While the devotional value of such an appeal may be salutary, only in a general and intercessory way might this particular family serve to nurture the imagination of actual families. But it can serve equally as a deterrent to awakening to the unpredictable, mysterious power of God to appear in our often broken, often messy midst as healing, compassion, mercy, beauty and sheer grace.

In its insistence upon so tightly defining the ideal *Familiaris consortio* does not provide a rich, nuanced and thoroughly Catholic sense of sacramentality. I am not suggesting that the ideal should be willy-nilly cast aside, nor do I mean to minimise the crucial role of the ecclesial community in the moral and spiritual guidance of families. Rather I am saying that the two Catholic Christian theological stances—the one emphasizing the idealized sacrament, harmonious and clearly defined, and the other in its incarnated form as a sacramental imagination that erupts in the midst of the vexing, un-idealized human condition—need to dance together.

What is at stake here is not just theology but the wildness and freedom of the divine. What is at stake here is the important role of mature reflection upon human experience in the theological enterprise. That is where spirituality, conceptualised as more than 'theology in walking shoes', comes in and where the Christian humanist insistence

[12] Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002). See especially the chapter 'Toward a Theology of Christian Family', 193–219.

[13] *Familiaris consortio*, 4.86. John Paul II is not the first in the tradition to look to the Holy Family as exemplary of actual families. On this and John Paul's devotion see Joseph F. Chorpenning, *The Holy Family Devotion: A Brief History* (Montreal: Centre de recherche et de documentation Oratoire Saint-Joseph, 1997).

that God may be found in all things plays out. The ideal is meant to inspire, and we are to aspire to it. Admittedly, if we fail to attend to the wisdom that the ideal presents, we may become unmoored, adrift from life-giving sources of guidance. But when the ideal prohibits us from perceiving the presence of grace that lives and moves among us, it loses its vitality. It becomes not a source of hope and encouragement but an instrument of fear and discouragement. Even more damagingly, it may become a measure by which we judge each other, a source of false pride or of condemnation of ourselves and others. We may narrow our vision so severely that we fail to admit the possibility that God is indeed with us.

Twenty years ago my husband and our three children, then aged fifteen, nine and seven, sat anxiously at the foot of my hospital bed as I emerged from the anaesthetic fog that follows cancer surgery. My husband, reduced to wordlessness, handed me a small slip of paper on which he had written the following prayer: 'May you live to see your children's children'.

This past Memorial Day, the chubby eight-month-old sitting in the highchair before me, her chin coated with a patina of pureed mango and green bean, along with her attentive mother who spoons it off and I myself must, according to the neat formulations assumed in Familaris consortio, *be categorized among the 'difficult cases' of family life that do not fit into the idealized picture. I will not specify the numerous ways in which this unspeakably grace-filled moment and the many arduous, self-emptying events and steps that led up to its arrival are 'irregular'. But it is my sure experience there is no difficulty here in this ordinary moment: we are saturated with grace, it flows uninhibited, welcome, no qualifications, no question: the invisible made visible here and now; God with us.*

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