

## PRAYER AND FAMILY LIFE

By E.M.G.B.

**B**OTH prayer and family life are very much private affairs, and in particular no two Catholic families face the same set of circumstances when trying to lead the Catholic life of prayer. This therefore is my justification for launching into a description of our family background, since without this it is hard for others to know what is, or is not, applicable in their case. (This whole question of applicability seems to me a fundamental one in the spiritual life, since so much discouragement, or even real harm, can be caused by trying to force a devotion or a way of life on those who are not naturally called or fitted for that way.) In the first place both my wife and I have a certain bond in that the religious backgrounds of our families are somewhat similar. In my wife's case, she is a convert, after our marriage, and of all the rest of her relations only one cousin (with no family) is a Catholic, the remainder all being vaguely Christian or agnostic. In my case my mother, a convert, is the only Catholic member of our side: she divorced my father who was married three times in all. I had however the great privilege of being brought up a Catholic. Both my wife and I have one sister each; mine is a lapsed Catholic. Thus, except for my mother, we have no close relations who are Catholics and no real first-hand knowledge of Catholic family life on the traditional pattern. We have four children under six, a fact which almost all our relations tend to regard as a piece of carelessness bordering on madness. We are prosperous enough to own our house and to be able to afford some daily help, but not a full-time nanny, as our parents did. I am fortunate in having an interesting job which is reasonably well paid and gives me more time at home than most husbands; we also have some private income. In short, when I stand aside to view my material blessings, I feel heartily ashamed of ever being angry or depressed with life, and I try to offer up a prayer of gratitude for these blessings as often as I can.

This brings me then to my first major point which is that, with a family, positive prayer is more important than any other sort. Thanking God for all that he has given one should be a most

frequent type of prayer, thanksgiving for wife (or husband), for the children, for one's home, for all the many interests and activities that make up family life and, above all, for the opportunity to help lead souls to heaven. After all, we married people freely chose our state of life and must offer thanks to God for giving us the fulness of the condition we desired. Furthermore, in the West, we must never cease to thank God also for the material benefits we so easily take for granted; how different would our lot be if, say, we were poor Vietnamese or Indian Catholics with a family which, through no fault of ours, we had small prospect of ever feeding, clothing or housing adequately; how different too would our situation be if we were in a communist-controlled country in Eastern Europe with the authorities ceaselessly trying to cut our children off from the faith and from their parents.

A second type of prayer which is particularly appropriate to family life may be called the prayer of acceptance, though it is true it can only too easily degenerate into ejaculations of depression and resignation. This kind of prayer tends to come more spontaneously than the first, especially during the innumerable crises with which family life seems to be punctuated, for with small children sudden illnesses seem to come endlessly, and for many who are trying to rear a large family financial problems are a chronic cause of anxiety. Thus to make this prayer of acceptance does demand a good measure of at least nine out of twelve of the fruits of the Holy Ghost, namely charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness and faith. However inadequately this prayer is achieved, the daily and nightly offering up to God of all that happens is the conscious effort of the will which is the fundamental part of prayer. Paradoxically the passive prayer of acceptance is a prayer of ceaseless activity. It is the prayer of obedience designed for the married state.

These twin pillars of prayer, the one of thanksgiving and the other of acceptance, seem to me the ones on which those with a family must concentrate. I am not in any way belittling the importance of going to mass frequently, nor of frequent reception of the sacraments, nor of any other devotions, but I do believe that the first duty of Catholics with families is to try to show a sceptical world the way in which the Church sanctifies the vocation of marriage. This means that, within certain limitations, the

care of the family must come first. With the modern conditions of little or no help either inside or outside the house, it is often almost impossible for a family to get to mass except on a Sunday (and even doing that is an operation demanding skill, patience and hard work, so that the sight of a large family at mass should remind the priest that what can be seen above the surface is only a small proportion of the whole, the time spent in church being a fraction of the time spent in getting them there). Neither is it physically practicable, for those who have small children at any rate, to attempt to live by a set of devotional rules designed for those who have no family; care of one's health is of prime importance, and any self-imposed way of spiritual life which jeopardizes health must, in these circumstances, be morally wrong. In its wisdom the catechism lists as one of the six sins against the Holy Ghost that of 'envy of another's spiritual good'.

One of the dangers of family life is that the parents' own private spiritual life can slowly be undermined and even extinguished, for the great difficulty in the family circle lies in achieving and maintaining the correct balance between the communal and the private aspects of prayer. The continuous wear and tear of family life does demand a very considerable spiritual reserve in the parents if they are to bring up the children in the way of prayer. There are many methods by which parents can preserve or increase their spiritual capital. Frequent attendance at mass and reception of the sacraments is clearly the ideal way. But for those who have to look after young children unaided, and live some distance from a church, this can be well nigh impossible, and if it is so, the fact must be calmly accepted and other means found. First there is reading. A daily effort should be made to turn one's mind to religious matters by the reading of some book or magazine. One little rule which can be managed by everyone is to read in the missal the special prayers of the saint for the day. The weekly Catholic press often has helpful articles. Periodicals, such as *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, are to my mind of the greatest value, for nearly every issue has one or more articles which are written for layfolk, and many of these are of outstanding quality; for instance I have read and reread 'His Will is our Peace' by B. M. Frederick (April 1959 number). Others may find *The Christian Democrat* more to their liking; it does not matter which, but at least one out of the large variety of Catholic periodicals ought to be taken

regularly. In the first place the periodical should be chosen with great care; it should inspire, and if it ceases to do this another one should be found, because for the married reader this periodical should always be a sort of 'spiritual bouquet', something which is joyfully awaited, to be savoured during the odd quiet quarter of an hour. Nevertheless, however stimulating such a periodical may be, there will always be articles in it which are either inapplicable or not helpful, therefore it is unlikely that a number can be read from cover to cover. Discrimination in reading is important. Where the more serious type of Catholic reading is concerned, what may be termed the spiritual classics, I can do no better than quote from B. M. Frederick's article. She writes, 'Such reading may, indeed, disastrously sap our courage; for if we see the spiritual life stretching ahead in terms of desolation, unceasing struggle and grim endurance we shall hardly find heart to take the first step.' However, before having a family, I did derive very considerable help from de Caussade's *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* and St Theresa of Avila's *Autobiography*, but I now find that I cannot concentrate on these works, the circumstances for which they were written seem too remote from our way of life, and the language in which they are couched is so aloof from our way of thought. The same deficiencies apply to St Francis de Sale's *Devout Life*. Nevertheless I am hoping that later in life I may be able once more to gain consolation from these and other works of a similar kind. I have left to the last the question of the regular reading of the scriptures. Although I find it hard myself, I am sure that a serious attempt should be made to follow such a practice, and where possible a specific period of the day ought to be set aside for this purpose. The ideal should be to read through the gospels and the psalms each year. Such reading should be done both slowly and meditatively.

Spiritual reading has another side to it. It does make a parent sit down quietly and try to think about matters unconnected with the hurly-burly of family life; such a brief relaxation has great therapeutic value.

Another excellent way for parents to replenish their spiritual capital is by attending retreats. For those with small children these retreats must be brief; a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon is ideal, there must be some organisation to look after the children in order that the parents may be able to listen in peace to what the

priest has to say (keeping the children under control during mass makes it impossible to concentrate properly on the Sunday sermon), and finally the retreat should be held within easy reach of those attending. For a time we were fortunate in having such retreats, held in the chapel of a neighbouring country house, and we found them most helpful and refreshing. When the children are older and travelling with them is easier, I am hoping that we shall be able to make an annual family retreat at Spode House. In the meantime, it would be a great experiment if each diocese tried to arrange two or three family retreat centres with retreats to be held every month on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon; perhaps these could be held in the houses of religious orders. These retreats should be aimed at helping the spiritual life of those with families, with particular emphasis on methods of prayer; time should be allowed for private prayer and for a quiet talk with the priest (or priests) between the discourses; also there should be an opportunity to get to confession, the set times for confessions in a parish so often clash with essential family duties.

I fear that I have little original to say about family prayers as such. Whenever possible we say family prayers all together in the evening at the children's bed-time, and our younger boy of two and a half is proud of the fact that he can already say a somewhat garbled version of the *Hail Mary*. We try to make prayers a happy family occasion and like to think that the children enjoy it, thus we keep prayers cheerful and informal and do not allow ourselves to be put out by a certain number of interruptions and irrelevancies. As a part of these prayers we encourage the children to make their own personal requests to our Lord. We also offer up a prayer whenever we make a car trip together, say a prayer or two *en route* that we may have a safe journey, and try to make a thanksgiving prayer on arriving at our destination. Another family devotion is always to pay a visit to the church when we are in the town; on these occasions the children usually light a candle and say a brief prayer in the Lady Chapel. Although neither my wife nor I find the saying of the rosary, either publicly or privately, an easy form of devotion, we have given the elder children rosaries in the hope that perhaps they may develop that devotion to saying the rosary which we are so conscious that we lack.

Children should be brought to Sunday mass as soon as possible. Our baby of eight months has just begun to come to church.

It has been our experience that children behave well if they are accustomed to coming to church from an early age, and Sunday mass thereby becomes a weekly event to which they look forward. Our principle is to treat them, as far as possible, as responsible beings and expect them to follow what the rest of the congregation does; ours have rarely let us down. We always try to sit fairly near the front of the church so that they can watch what happens at the altar. We find that the books produced by the American organization, the Catechetical Guild Educational Society (St Paul, Minnesota), are popular, as is *My Faith* by Bishop Heenan (published jointly by Burns Oates and Macmillan). These are the only children's religious books, which I know of, that appeal to the under sevens, but I should be grateful to hear of others.

There is one further point that it would be dishonest to omit mentioning from an article of this kind. There comes a time when most parents feel that their family is as large as they can manage. I hope that it is permissible to pray that one's family will not continue to grow in numbers and that one should not fall into sin preventing any increase. At this stage periods of abstinence are demanded from the husband, whilst the wife must have great sympathy and understanding towards her husband, and both must be ready joyfully to accept God's will should another child be conceived. Here is where the bonds of love and prayer between husband and wife need to be both firm and deep. Prayer and the family life have many facets.

In conclusion therefore the reader is asked to remember that these reflections are written by one who is at a particular stage in the upbringing of his family. In five years time the situation will be different and a revised way of prayer will have to be found, for family life and prayer can never have that stability of routine which is the hallmark of religious life in the cloister; experiments must continuously be made to try to keep the spiritual life of the family in tune with the changing circumstances. Flexibility is the watchword when thinking of prayer and the family life.

