

FAMILY LIFE AND THE COMMON LIFE¹

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THE great need is for a fully common life, within the family, which will make the family of use to the world around it. In past ages the monastic community was the spearhead. Today I feel it is the family, the Catholic family, which is to be the spearhead for Catholic penetration of a pagan world.

To make common life within the family a reality it is necessary to treat the children of the family as persons. I disagree with the saying, 'Give me a child until it is seven . . .'. Apart from the mythical child of five who, on being told he had committed a mortal sin, replied: 'Oh, but I cannot commit a mortal sin yet because I have not got the use of reason', one trains rather than teaches a child of under seven. I would almost say, 'Give me a child *when* it is seven: I don't much care what happened earlier'.

The sooner you can let command pass into counsel the sooner your child becomes an autonomous person. If you are really treating children as persons you must allow them to make their own choices and not choose for them. They are going to have to stand up to a great deal in the world today; there is no good their doing something merely because mother or father has done it. It seems to me that a real objection to the family Rosary crusade is that children should feel moral pressure to take a pledge because their elders are urging it. If a child prefers to say his Rosary privately, let him do so; if he prefers not to say it, then he need not. A family 'that prays together' *because of parental pressure* will not 'stay together'.

Devotion must anyhow grow from knowledge of its Object; and here parents could achieve far more than they usually do. I think it comes rather naturally to children to love God and it is not difficult for them to pray if they are

¹ These are only fragmentary notes of my lecture made some time afterwards: some points arising in discussion have been incorporated in the talk; a little has been added to the account given at the Conference of American groups.—M.W.

taught a little about him. Moreover, in the world in which we are living today we greatly need a knowledge of our Faith—we need at least a minimum of theology. Teaching children by Catholic Evidence heckling methods you discover they love theology. I have heard some wonderful examples of the depth of understanding of which they are capable—a girl of thirteen, asked how could the Pope go to Confession and have his sins forgiven by a priest who was his inferior, replied: 'The priest in the confessional represents Jesus Christ and is not inferior to anybody'. A girl of fourteen, told that our blessed Lady was only the mother of Christ's human nature, replied: 'Natures don't have mothers. Only people have mothers.'

The family which has tried to help their children to develop into persons will have great happiness in their family life.

But also common life within the family should prepare the individual for common life outside it—in the world in which we live today. The most terrifying thing about that world is the way love has been lost—how easily hate can be stirred up. It seems that the only ground for common unity in the modern world is the ground whereon we stand united *against* something or someone—something we hate or oppose. St Paul foresaw a world 'without affection' and today we are living in it. The family is the place where love is natural and this natural love can be made supernatural. The mother and father find no difficulty in making sacrifices for their children. There is a deep unreality in the common boast of loving humanity rather than one's own family. Charity must begin somewhere and it is right for it to begin at home. It would be wrong if it simply stayed there; but, like all good, its nature is to spread itself, and starting with the home for centre its circumference will grow wider.

A happy family tends to draw others into its own common life. Father Vincent McNabb used to say that all sociology should start from the New Testament. The young are naturally gregarious and a text that often comes to the lips of parents is 'offering hospitality without murmuring'. The first natural extension of the common life of any family is this social one.

I have not time in half-an-hour to discuss the common life of the family in its civic or parochial contexts, nor am I very well equipped for this owing to my rather migrant life. But I feel it may be of value just to mention some attempts made by small American groups to find forms of common life more helpful to Christian development than the big city framework of cinemas, multiple stores, radio and television.

Not everybody can leave the city and 'flee to the fields' (Father Vincent once took this as the title for a book), but many small groups are gathering either around monasteries or such centres as the Grail at Loveland, Ohio, or else simply on their own to give their children a healthy country life and themselves to engage in part or whole-time farming. Many of these are well-educated people who choose farming deliberately as a better way of life than a city career.

Others who cannot become farmers keep their jobs in town but live in a country community with gardens, like-minded neighbours, and space and air for their (usually large) families.

One group in the immediate neighbourhood of New York consisting of fifteen families has bought a sixty-acre wooded hill on which they are building their own houses. Trees had to be felled, a proper road made where they found only a track, wells dug, and light and telephone brought from the nearest small town. A committee decides which family needs a house first and all the men co-operate at week-ends in building it. The family then move in and another house is started. Frequent business and family meetings plan schemes of co-operative action (buying in bulk, conveyance of children to school and of men to work, garden developments, etc.). These meetings help to iron out inevitable problems and to weld together the families already settled and the town dwellers who are getting ready to move.

Another group in Wisconsin is partly rural, partly urban. A family on a fairly large farm give hospitality to four unmarried men who help to run the farm and have also their own specialities—one keeps bees and is starting a bakery for home-ground wholemeal bread and cereals, another is head farmer to his host who himself works in the city. Other families have an acre or two; grouped together,

several of them have built a root cellar for common storage of their winter roots. Others of this group live in the city. The special element about these people is that the chief link uniting them is the Liturgy. Their chaplain sings a Mass for them every Saturday in which they all participate. Whenever possible they say Divine Office daily. Some say only the Little Hours, others the English shortened Breviary (in which Matins is somewhat curtailed). It was a remarkable experience for me to be the guest of a man in charge of a filling station who set out for a 6.30 Mass daily before going to work, recited Lauds with his wife in the morning and Vespers in the evening, getting in the rest of the Little Hours between attendance to his clients. The group's chief centre is a Catholic bookshop and library which is taken care of by three girls who live in the shop and make of it a wonderful place of hospitality and liturgical inspiration.

Yet another group of families in Indiana have chosen as their special form of apostolate the breaking down of inter-racial barriers between Catholics. Half of these families are coloured, half white, and the principal means they have chosen is the simple one of personal hospitality. They dine in turns at one another's houses and find that this draws them far closer than all the committees and organisation in the world. They have as their pastor a worthy leader, for he gave hospitality in their need to a coloured family whose baby was born in the new Bethlehem of his presbytery.

The large-scale Catholic works in America are probably known to all the readers of this paper: the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality, the Inter-racialist Friendship Houses, the Cana Conferences and Christian family movements. But what is significant about these small movements is just the fact that they are small, that they are *family* movements, and that they are springing up spontaneously everywhere. Inside two great cities I know two houses that are practically the work of individuals. One young man has gathered eighteen down-and-outs into a real family life: his brothers help him with gifts of coffee, vegetables, etc., from the large store owned by them. Gradually the broken-down men are built up and begin in turn to bring some money to the house from their own wages. But from the

moment they begin to live there they also begin to help with feeding the long line of hungry men who come to their down-town bread-line. They make soup and load it in huge containers onto a lorry, add a mountain of loaves, and serve some hundred men each night, out of whom a few will later become inmates of the house. Steadily also the rehabilitated men return to their families—when these families are willing to receive them.

In another city two sisters and two friends agreed to pool their salaries and rent a large flat where they could house four more girls. Out of the eight as many as four may be unable to pay their way. The place is bright and beautifully kept, but there is no central heat—and the winters are bitter. The kitchen is also the bathroom, there is no lift though they are on the fourth floor, and no privacy for girls who could on their own live in ease and comfort. Here, too, the family atmosphere is a marked one.

What is especially striking about these groups is the cult they have for evangelical poverty. Reacting vigorously against the materialism that surrounds them, they choose of full deliberation a way of living in which they can never hope to be wealthy.

The indispensable basis both for common life within the family and for the family's participation in the common life of the community is a home. The most ghastly tragedy of today is the crowding of families into one or two rooms where they can hardly live with decency and certainly have no possibility of a richly developed family life.

This question should weigh upon the consciences of all Christians. Experience in Canada, the United States and England has shown me that while a house can always be bought it can hardly ever be rented in any country. Most families, even if poor, can afford the weekly payments on a bought house, just as they can afford the rent on a hired one. What they can almost never afford is the initial down-payment. Surely it should be the duty of every well-to-do Catholic family to help at least one poorer family by finding the down-payment for a house. Two or three hundred pounds is not a great sum to invest in the happiness of a human family who are our brothers in Christ's mystical body.