

Marriage and Family Life Mass

September 26th 2009

A school of love, a school of life and a school of faith.

When I spoke earlier this year at the Chrism Mass, I was anxious then to emphasise the vocation of each person and I quoted Pope Leo the Great, speaking on the occasion of his anniversary of Ordination. Pretty far back in the year 444 but he said this:

“In the unity of our faith and baptism we enjoy an undivided fellowship and a dignity common to us all.” He went on to say that what unites all members of the Church is the spiritual gift of serving the Lord. And so the fundamental vocation of each is the call to holiness; a call which is given to all the baptised, whether young, old, single or married. But in this, my golden jubilee year, I wanted to promote two vocations in particular, marriage and priesthood. They are of course linked; the one often flows from the other; since the vocation to priesthood is frequently born out of a good and deeply Christian marriage and family life.

A very good example of this is Pope John XXIII. After he had left home and achieved quite a responsible position in the Church, he wrote this letter to his parents. He said, “Ever since I left home at the age of ten, I have read many books and learned many things that you could not have taught me.” Now listen to this; “but what I have learnt from you remains the most precious and the most important and it sustains and gives life to the many other things I learnt later in so many years of study and teaching.”

Now what were those things that the future Pope learned from his parents and family at such a tender age, which he considered to be most important and which sustained him for the rest of his long life? I would suggest that they centre around three things; the family as a school of love, a school of life and a school of faith.

First of all the school of love. The lesson we’ve just heard spoke very much about the cost of enduring love. I came across some unpublished words by Cardinal Hume on love. He wrote this, “It is exhilarating to discover another who will captivate our heart and occupy the empty space within us. It is thrilling,” he said, “to realise that we have a privileged place in someone else’s heart and life.” He went on to say, “We discover that love can raise us to the height and plunge us to the depth. All true human love however transient and imperfect has in it something of the infinite and eternal.” Those words ‘raise us to the height, plunge us to the depths,’ spell out something of the joy and the cost of a human relationship. It’s all the difference between falling in love at the beginning and then loving which is the living out of those wedding vows. And so the family responds to that deep need within us to love and to be loved. It makes us feel valued as people and is the very basis and heart of our emotional security, which gives us self worth and self acceptance. If children, young people, are shown love they will sense that they are not only lovable but will grow up able to both receive love and to return that love to others. And that is why a stable and happy home is so important. It provides purpose for children with the right environment to learn about human love and God’s love.

But the family is also the school of life. It is in the context of the family that we look to grow and relate to one another. Love and life are especially linked. The family is above all the

place where I am fully known, loved and received just as I am; where I learn how to grow and relate. Through the family we learn the fundamental skills for life, physically, emotionally and socially.

As the school of faith, parents are the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. By what you say and do you show the young the truths of our faith and the values of the Gospel. Yes, many others of the Church share with you in this task, our catechists and our schools in large measure, but the main responsibility for the young person's religious formation rests upon your shoulders, so try to make your homes genuinely Christian.

Regarding marriages between Catholics and other baptised Christians or those of other faiths, I invite you to make in your marriage both the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer and action together in the unity of love.

Well it is interesting this week that we have the announcement of the present Pope's visit to this country, probably in September next year. I recall and many of you here will recall that very first visit of any Pope, the then Pope John Paul II, to this country in '82. He spoke to married couples and he said this, "I want to reach out to all those who have experienced difficulties in marriage. We must reach out in love," he said, "to all who know the path of failure in marriage and the loneliness of bringing up a family on their own and to those whose life has been changed by death or tragedy or illness." I want to commend all those groups, parish networks, organisations who seek to strengthen and support Marriage and Family Life. They are listed at the back of the souvenir booklet which will be given out today. Especially I want to thank our co-ordinator for Marriage and Family Life, Father Graham Smith and indeed all the members of our Commission.

I am fully aware that what I have put before you today is very much an ideal picture; and that society and the place of marriage within society is sadly far removed from that. Only last week in the Tablet, it had an excellent article on the fracture of families and the creation of serial families and therefore the loss of stability for the young. So crucial for their development and well being. And then again this morning's radio said that the number of prenuptial agreements in this country has increased now tenfold, and I was asking myself, "What can be in the minds of such people as they prepare for their marriage and commitment to each other. Therefore, we must continue to keep the ideal of marriage alive. Example is far more powerful than exhortation, and I continue to believe profoundly that the wellbeing of our society goes through the family and that a good number of the ills that we are seeing in our society come from the disintegration of marriage and family life. So although marriage is at a nadir in popularity I still sense that most people in their hearts aspire to a lasting and happy relationship in marriage. Amen.

Bishop Thomas McMahon