

Feast of the Holy Family - Year C

Listening to my homilies for several years now you will know that I had a very happy childhood and adolescence in a loving and secure family. I have come to appreciate this blessing more and more the older I have become. My experience bears out the wise words I read recently in a book about the differences there are between integrated, supportive families and those which are regarded as dysfunctional.

The author of the book points to fourteen characteristics which mark out healthy, resilient families. Not all families possess all fourteen but most are found to some degree in those which are happy and enduring. Families which are unhappy lack them - most of them, or all of them.

It would take too long to describe each characteristic in detail so I have grouped together those which are related and which bolster family life. Every family needs encouragement no matter how loving they are so I hope these remarks will be beneficial and give new heart to one and all.

One important group of characteristics are those which give a family a '**sense of being a family**' so that the members retain a feeling of closeness and mutual caring - even when they are at some geographical distance from each other. They include efforts to keep in touch with each other, by whatever means are available; showing concern for the elders of the family circle; being hospitable to one another - and to each others' friends and associates; making an effort to gather together as a family with some degree of regularity (not just at weddings and funerals).

In this group of characteristics would be included the sharing of stories about legendary or eccentric family members past and present, and also visiting together the graves of parents and grandparents and even more distant forebears. This link with posterity encourages a sense of security and of belonging to one another. These features are rarely found in dysfunctional families.

Another characteristic which can be evident in many ways is that of **having a 'larger purpose'**. Some families seem to be focused almost entirely on themselves; they concentrate on their own relationships and welfare; they give their attention primarily, even solely, to the acquisition of property and the pursuit of pleasure. They are hedonistic, concerned principally with their material comfort and well being.

However, the happiest families are those who are involved in concerns beyond themselves. Individual members allow one another, indeed support one another, in undertaking charitable activities or in a commitment to issues of justice and peace. The individual members of families can even be engaged together *as a family unit* in the advancement of some worthy cause - such as living simply, sustainably, and in solidarity with the whole human family and with our fellow creatures.

In fact such gracious and beneficial activity can be inspired by the imagination and commitment of different family members old and young.

A healthy family is one which can **accept and deal with failure**. It is not a failure if you have a failure. Children are taught this in Primary School these days. Errors and shortcomings can be learning experiences evoking greater skill or sensitivity or generosity. When things go wrong a healthy family is mutually supportive. For example: when unemployment undermines family security; or there is alcohol or drug abuse; or when a member becomes a law-breaker and others in the family also suffer the consequences.

These are the realities of human frailty and sin. Our family image as well as an individual's self-image can be damaged by such experiences. An unhealthy family will refuse to accept help, or admit their need of it. A good family will stand together in responding as positively to the problem as they can, keeping hope alive, and the door open to the errant member as far as prudence allows.

Having family **traditions and rituals** is bonding. These can be associated with birthdays, anniversaries, with stages in education or maturing, and even with going on holiday. There are many customs in our religious traditions which can and should feature in family life.

I was able to list at least five in our family connected solely with the approach and celebration of Christmas - stirring the ingredients of the Christmas Pudding, licking the spoon, dropping the silver coins into it to be discovered while eating it on Christmas Day; hanging the decorations in the living room and on the Christmas Tree; sending Greetings Cards to relatives and friends; erecting the family Crib scene; and placing a special candle in the front window before setting off to attend Midnight Mass. Other ritual activities marked Lent, Easter and Pentecost.

A healthy family is not embarrassed to pray together, or to talk about God openly - including sharing the experiences of doubts as well as of beliefs and what has been supportive of faith. It is an unhealthy family that can list few such traditions or conversations.

Finally it seems important to do all that is possible to prevent the activities of individual members from separating, isolating, or dividing the family unit. Engagement in sport, in making music, in belonging to interest groups and clubs, having part-time jobs, and taking extra lessons can be very positive experiences for each individual and beneficial to the family as a whole. It is good to encourage the development of personal skills, and to have *spaces in our togetherness*.

But it is also important to have time in each other's company - meals, entertainment, outings, holidays. How can we enjoy each other if we hardly see each other? Healthy families know how to achieve a good balance between personal independence and the benefits of communal activities.

On this Feast of the Holy Family let us pray for the grace to act wisely in such matters and to support one another in endeavours which are of mutual benefit - at home, in Church, for the wider community and world at large.