

# A Community of Love

*The family is a community of love  
where every member feels understood, accepted and loved  
and seeks to understand, accept and love the others.*

*—John Paul II*

# A Community of Love

SPIRITUALITY OF FAMILY LIFE

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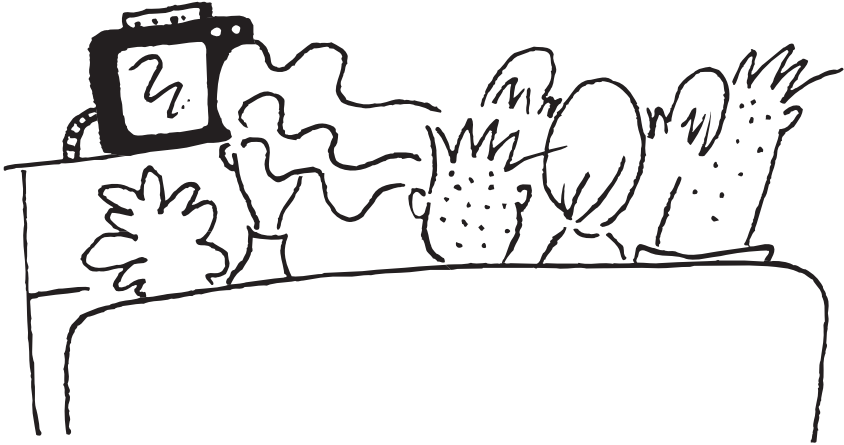
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I dedicate these pages to the many students who have been given to me for over forty years of teaching. I can think of no other greater sacred calling, nor one with as many blessings, as that of a teacher. I want to include in my dedication their families too. As I state in the pages that follow, we are never alone. We journey through our days and nights with others, often with our families, both present and past. And in the midst of it all, God is also there, not as a passive observer but as One who dwells with us, whether we are conscious of it or not. One of my goals in *A Community of Love* is to open our eyes to God's hidden presence, where life and love meet, ignite and create anew, day after day.

# We need to talk....



Family life has changed dramatically over the last century, and I am not impressed by how our culture supports family life today. Society pays too little attention to the survival of the family, and government seems open to providing only token assistance. Corporations and other large enterprises treat family as a necessary problem. Mass media treats family like Play-Doh, shaping it to whatever odd shape or size the media needs to hawk its products.

The challenges of family living can easily compete with any of life's other trials and tribulations. M. Scott Peck's most quoted line in his monumental bestseller, *The Road Less Traveled*, states, "Life is difficult." You might recall that he wrote it somewhat as a response to what he viewed as

the free and easy approach to life that seemed to be part of the sixties and seventies. In a later work called *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, he added that life is also complex, addressing those who seemed bent on reducing the rigors of daily living to simple formulas or solutions.

He was right on both counts. Life is difficult and complex. And when you apply these characteristics to family life, you can add superlatives to the description.

Some think the family as an institution is in its final days. Or that it is replaceable by some other social arrangement. However, while it is true that many challenges assault families today, I cannot agree.

Even amid the pervasive depersonalizing forces of today, many families do stay together. In fact, as unconventional as this may sound, I wonder whether many families might be better today than ever. They embody mutual respect and a healthy regard for the goodness of each family member, and their love for one another seems boundless. They also stand in service to the needs of others outside the family.

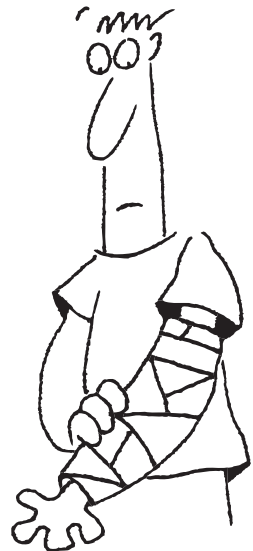
But I must also add—both from my experience and my research—that not a single one of them made it to where they are without hard work and a few tears. Families can look pretty battle worn at times, but like warriors returning from battle, their cuts, bruises and scars can be badges of courage and commitment.

Their effort seems to be come more from within than from the surrounding culture, but fortunately a few organizations—mostly grassroots groups—commit both time and effort to support family life. Perhaps the

only large institution on record trying to help families is organized religion. Churches, synagogues and mosques have all expressed solid support of the family. But religious groups today sometimes seem so embroiled in their own struggle for survival that they have little energy left for other groups. So when churches try to partner with the family, they may appear like two wounded wayfarers leaning on each other as they walk slowly along the path.

In the autumn of 1980, I found myself overseas for the first time in my life. I had been invited to serve as a peritus (expert advisor) to the United States bishops who were participating in the first international synod at the Vatican called by Pope John Paul II. The topic under discussion was the role of the Christian family in the modern world.

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John Paul II wrote more about the role of the family in both church and society than any other pope in history. Perhaps his own family grief—losing a baby sister, then his mother at an early age; later, his older brother and his father, all before he was ordained as a priest—was part of the late pope’s consistent and compelling support of family life. He affirmed the importance of the family, and proclaimed over and over again that the community of family was an irreplaceable source of life for both the church and society. Because family life brings to many their deepest joy as well as their most trying moments, he included family as one of the “essentials” for the life of the human person.

One of John Paul II’s greatest contributions was his ability to connect the seemingly secular, such as family life, with the outpouring of God’s life and love into creation. He was especially adept at making this connection when it came to the more difficult and challenging aspects of life, including the difficulties inherent in family life. I am grateful for his many insights into the spiritual life of the family, and my wife and I have applied his teachings in the *Familiaris Consortio (On the Family)* to our own family.

Over the years, I have taught on the theological and spiritual dimensions of marriage and family life, and written widely on the topic. I have also been called to advise and write for the Catholic bishops of the United States in matters dealing with sexuality, marriage and family life. But before I go any further, you need to know that I am no abstract idealist, no airy theologian when it comes to family life. I know from experience



the difficult moments and hard edges of family life. But I also know its moments of delight and satisfaction.

My “first family,” the family I was born into, was a Catholic family in Hammond, Indiana. All my grandparents were immigrants to the United States, my father’s parents coming from Lithuania and my mother’s parents from Germany. I was the eldest, the only son with three sisters. My strongest memories of growing up are filled with the presence of aunts, uncles and cousins. We lived in close proximity to each other, and when we combined both parents’ families, we numbered around fifty. Each holiday brought a large group together for loud, boisterous and playful times. I also recall many heated arguments, which mostly ended with smiles all around.

I think of my “second family” as the religious community I entered when I was eighteen years old. One of the reasons I wanted to become a Holy Cross religious was that part of their mission was to develop “community spirit” among its members. But as I neared the time for my ordination to the priesthood, important questions surfaced both for the community and myself whether I had chosen the right path for me. Eventually, through difficult and sometimes painful reflection, I came to realize that I was being called elsewhere. So a little shy of forty years ago, I walked out the door of the seminary. I was twenty-six years old and ready to start anew. But I had grown a thousand ways during those years with a wonderful group of young men, many of whom have remained lifelong friends.

My “third family” began with my marriage to Karen. The date of our wedding was 6/11/66, which, if it were a poker hand, would mean a full house. My third family became exactly that. We eventually numbered seven: one daughter, the eldest, and four sons. When our youngest son was five years old, we began to take in foster children, most of whom were infants. Over the next twenty years, we experienced all the joys and sufferings that came with caring for over seventy little ones, many of whom were labeled “special needs” children. This meant that they came to us with serious physical or emotional needs. When asked if this was very difficult, I would usually mention that in a home full of adolescents—which our home was—it was wonderful. When our teenage children complained that they had it hard, we would need only to remind them of these little ones’ difficulties and their complaints would evaporate.

My wife and I were getting close to our autumn years, and we began to talk about pulling back from foster parenting and turning our attention more to grandchildren. We were beginning to feel a bit tired, and it seemed time to move on. Then one day the phone rang. It was a social worker with whom we had worked to place one of our foster children just a few months earlier. Her words were like a lightning bolt directly striking our home: “They don’t want her anymore.” She referred to a little girl we had cared for from her earliest days until she was two. A new era of family life for us was about to begin.

We were stunned. How could anyone not want this precious little

girl? But we also were familiar enough with the world of foster care and adoption to know that abandonment happens—more often than the general public is aware of.

Our immediate response was to request that she be returned to us as a foster child until a new family could be found to adopt her. There was a silent pause on the phone.

“We can’t do that,” replied the worker. “It would be too hard on her to have to leave you again. Unless you would keep her.”

Adoption? A decision we had never considered for ourselves. If you were committed to foster care, as we were, it was almost a form of suicide to think of ever adopting any of the little ones you cared for. We loved them all as our own while they were with us. We knew our role and were accepting of both its joys and its pain. But we just never considered keeping any of our family visitors. Until then.

For a decision of this magnitude, my wife and I felt we needed some outside help. Fortunately, we found a wonderful therapist who had been working with adoptions for fifty years. We needed clarity, and we needed to face all the practicalities involved, should we choose to adopt. I was almost sixty, and my wife was not far behind. That’s grandparent age, not a time to begin parenting again.

After three weeks of considered conversation, we decided to adopt a new little daughter. We called social services and arranged a time for “pick up.” I must say that, as we drove to the agency, my stomach had more butterflies in it than I had on my wedding day.

Our new daughter's "things" were stacked in a pile outside the door. I carefully picked up each item—a small bike, a doll stroller, an assorted menagerie of stuffed animals and a blanket—all items we had given her before she had left us for her new home.

Then we were escorted to an empty room to await her arrival. Finally, after what seemed hours, the door opened and out the little angel walked. She was three years old. Surely there could not be any greater abundance of joy than when my wife wrapped her arms around her, and then I lifted her into my own arms. Some moments in life are just totally filled with God. That was one of them.

Two years later, we got another phone call. Another of our foster children had been turned back to the social services agency, and she was

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in the psychiatric unit of Denver Children's Hospital. It did not take us three weeks to decide this time; it was more like three seconds.

So now we find ourselves once again attending parents' meetings at the local school, monitoring homework assignments, and occasionally seeing various children's movies at the local theater (and, quietly, apart from their always attentive ears, rating which ones are really the worst).

We are fortunate to have the supportive care and assistance of our older children. Our new experience of parenting is fully a family venture. We had consulted with our older children before we decided to adopt. After all, we were no longer considered young anymore. There were actuary tables to consider.

It is now a few years later, which means that my wife and I both qualify for most senior discounts. We continue to learn new things every day about the adventure of family living as we face the challenges of parenting at the same time we are experiencing the blessings of grandparenting. Family life for us remains the primary way we see God calling us to holiness. And on our good days, we get close to appreciating that. We often realize it is within family that people become who they are. Family life is where the two most powerful realities of existence, namely life and love, join together to create and add to the great harmonics of the universe. It is where all of us learn a basic meaning of life, where our hearts are first broken open to savor the entwined mystery of human love and divine love. Family expressions of love and acceptance breathe life into the crevasses and contours of what makes each of us human.

Family spirituality is somewhat hidden from view, sacramental in form, deeply communal, faithful to the spiritual traditions of the church, often hopeful, and always loving. It has a playful side to it. It has its moments of zesty celebration and honest prayer. Sometimes it is declared with song and dance. Sometimes with tears and silence. It is expressed in very worldly, rather messy ways, and it seasons both the life of the church and the rest of the world.

A key image that has helped me unwrap the spiritual riches of family life is the image of the heart. In many cultures the heart symbolizes the center of the person and is associated for obvious reasons with life. A pulsating heart is a sure indicator of vitality.

But there is more. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the poetic writers took up this image of the heart to speak of our relationship with God. A closed heart was considered deaf and unresponsive to God's transforming presence and word. It was as if the word of God entered the person, traveled to the heart, and bounced off its hardened surface. Without entrance into the heart, there was no possibility of divine influence. God's word could not take up residence in the person with a hardened heart.

On the other hand, an open heart, a heart that is softened by love, welcomes God's presence. It is like the morning light filling a darkened room. Thomas Keating, in writing about intimacy with God, describes how the light of faith, the enlightened heart, can pour into our lives, shedding light not only on us but also on absolutely everything and everyone around us.

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Think of it: Raising children is an important part of the lives of a good segment of the population. But how often we miss the full, magnificent spiritual meaning of the commonplace. In reality, every authentic gesture of family care and concern is of spiritual importance.

I invite you to open your eyes and yourself to the presence of God within the ordinary, quotidian moments of family life. Raise your awareness that life is charged with the real presence and power of God's grace.

As I begin this reflection on the spiritual life of the family, I want to express gratitude to all the families who have given me life. My first family has changed some with the deaths of my mom and dad during the last decade. I firmly believe, however, that life still flows between us. My second family, the Congregation of Holy Cross, still plays a role in my life. Based on the vision of Father Patrick Peyton, founder of the Family Rosary, I remain connected with Holy Cross Family Ministries. They have provided me with moral and financial support to write this account. My present family is blessed with seven children and many grandchildren. (I will not give their number here because it seems to change rather regularly.) Family for me is a daily challenge, an abundant blessing, and the place—as Robert Frost once wrote—where they always have to take me in. I stand in wonder of its complexities and its constant place of importance in the great mystery of human life.