Cherishing Family Life
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Our families have an essential place in our lives not only during the formative years of childhood but also in adulthood for continuing nurture. We look to family for physical, emotional and spiritual support. Social surveys show that Australians have high expectations of marriage and family life. Yet it is also true that family life is under strain today: it is more fragile than in previous times. In this pastoral letter, I want to reflect with you from a Catholic perspective about some of the tensions experienced in family life and suggest that our faith tradition offers insight into its joys and difficulties. Together with the Diocesan Pastoral Council, I am committed to finding ways in which the Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Adelaide can further support families. The DPC has summed up their reflection on this matter with the phrase: *Family at the heart of the church*. Not only does this phrase express their commitment to family life, it also expresses their desire to foster the life of the church community which is at heart, God’s family, so that it more faithfully reflects the hospitality and inclusiveness that marked Jesus’ ministry.

When the Australian bishops reflected on family life in 1993, they wrote about families as, “those intimate communities within society whose members are committed to each other in love – whether through marriage, through blood or by adoption”: The permanent, loving communion of husband, wife and children along with the extended family holds the central place in a Catholic understanding of family. However, as the Australian bishops recognised, that kind of family life is not possible for every family, for a range of reasons. In Australia today there are also sole-parent families, step-families and blended families among others. Single people, who are neither married nor parents, are also members of families including the Church family. Theirs is a unique and valuable vocation and their love often bears immense fruit in the life of their family. In this letter I want to address all of these families.

I. Family today

Australian culture changed markedly in the 20th century, with the shape of family life changing accordingly. Some cultural changes have renewed and deepened family life while others demand further reflection and action. Here I want to discuss a few of the major changes.

First, as part of a movement across Western culture over the last century, Australians have come to recognise the equal dignity of women. We have moved from a culture in which men were assumed to be superior, to one in which this assumption is seen not only as false but also as destructive. We have come to acknowledge that women and men have equal rights and that therefore it is unacceptable that women be treated as second-class citizens. We have also come to acknowledge that women have a unique identity – that is the distinctive identity of women as individuals, which had previously been dismissed and now must be allowed to flourish. The recognition of women’s equal dignity has changed the shape of family life in many ways. In the relationship of marriage, women and men now come together as equal partners, freed to a great degree from confining past assumptions about gender. Girls have access to the same educational opportunities as boys and regularly attain equal or better results. Increasingly women have equal access to employment opportunities. It has often been pointed out that the recognition of women’s equality has also benefited men. When women and men relate as equals, richer relationships can flourish and men grow through daily engagement in the pivotal role of parenting.

I believe that the recognition of women’s equal dignity must be seen as an important advance in our time. It not only allows us to appreciate the true significance of each human life, it also leads to a deeper understanding and practice of Christian faith. It allows us to grasp with greater

clarity the meaning of the biblical text in which we read that both women and men are created in the image of God. Many aspects of Jesus' ministry also stand out more sharply, especially: his openness to women and their inclusion as disciples; his friendship with Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene; the presence of women at the cross; and the role of women as the first witnesses of the resurrection.

A second factor influencing the shape of family life is a broad development in our understanding of what it means to live a human life. We live with a greater awareness of personal freedom. This change also has a long history in Western culture, with deep roots in the 18th century, and affects most aspects of our common life. The notion of freedom has become central to the way that we govern ourselves, to the way in which the economy functions and to civil society more generally. In contrast to those who lived in pre-modern times, we strongly value a free economy, a free press, and ourselves as free citizens. It is also important to us that we are able to choose our own careers, our own partners in life, and our own faith, among many other things. Being coerced into any of these not only makes little sense to us, we see it as ultimately contradictory.

Since the 1960s the emphasis on personal freedom has taken a new turn with the emergence into popular consciousness of the notion of authenticity. We speak of being true to ourselves and being our ‘deepest selves’ in a way that previous cultures have not. A perceptive analyst of contemporary culture summarises the meaning of the ideal of authenticity in these words: “that each of us has his/her own way of realising our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.” Of course this ideal can be trivialised, sometimes descending into mere egoism, when, for example, the best reason that a person can give for a significant decision is one of bare choice — ‘that’s what I want’ or ‘that’s my choice’. Yet despite the risk of trivialisation, the quest to live an authentic life is a commendable moral ideal and it’s hard to imagine how we could avoid it today. For example, when a woman (or a man) decides to marry, she not only seeks to know her future spouse as best she can, she must also reflect deeply upon her own life, fathoming her own sense of self, in order to discern whether this relationship is the one to which she is called. Without that process of self-reflection, we would seriously question the meaning of her commitment.

The transition to understanding our lives in terms of authenticity means that now, within marriage and family life, there is a strong emphasis on the quality of relationships and interpersonal love, or what scholars call companionate marriage. Whatever about the risks, the desire to lead an authentic life sets us on a path that can lead to the divine, as Augustine knew so well and famously wrote, addressing God: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”.

This leads to a third factor influencing family life today, one intimately related to the notion of authenticity. I pointed out above that relationships like marriage and family are essential elements of our sense of fulfillment or authenticity. Indeed, we come to the deepest knowledge of ourselves only through significant relationships. But how do relationships lead to authenticity? How do we understand that connection? Often when these things are spoken about, it is said or assumed that relationships should serve our personal fulfillment and that if they do not serve us, then we should let them go. That is, it is assumed that marriage and family are instrumental to our happiness. This stance seems widespread today — a reality pointed out in a recent book by Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay. Our culture tends to suggest that all things exist for personal use and when they are no longer useful they can simply be set aside. But such thinking is confused and self-defeating. If our most important relationships lead us to be our deepest selves, then they can’t be seen as fundamentally dispensable. That is, they are not something that we merely use to meet our needs. Rather, they are the structure of the fabric of our lives, which is what I mean by saying that they are constitutive of our happiness. Our most important relationships are the context within which we grow; fostering these relationships is crucial to our growth. If we are to find fulfillment, then, we must cherish family life. We must be deeply committed to our most important relationships, continually working on the quality of marriage and family life.

3 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), 475.
5 Hugh Mackay, Advance Australia... Where?: How We’ve Changed and What Will Happen Next (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2007), chapter 7.
Understanding the richness and limitations of the contemporary notion of authenticity can help to make sense of the fragility of family life. I pointed out above that Australians have high expectations of family life – it means a great deal to us and most of us want to live in that way. Yet at the same time marriage and family life are very fragile, more fragile than ever before. How can we understand this seeming contradiction? Those who, like me, have celebrated hundreds of weddings, know that when couples come to marry they are deeply committed to each other: the fragility of marriage can’t be put down to a deficit in their intention. Sometimes a couple’s lack of skill in communicating or resolving conflict can lead to breakdown, but this could hardly account for the widespread fragility of family life. It seems to me that the tendency in our day to think of our most important relationships as simply serving personal goals (as instrumental to happiness) leaves family life immensely vulnerable. Our Catholic tradition can shed light on these issues and it’s to that that I will turn.

II. Family: meaning and vocation

If we were tempted to think that family life exists in a constant state of tension with personal fulfillment, the Christian tradition invites us to look further. Sometimes, of course, the desires of individual family members clash with the demands of family life but these clashes do not reflect the fundamental character of our lives. The Christian tradition holds that there is an intimate connection between faith, the love of others and personal fulfillment. This connection can be seen in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus responds to a lawyer who asked which is the greatest commandment. Jesus replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Matt 22:37-39). For Jesus, the love of God, the love of others and the love of self are intimately connected.

Pope John Paul II’s 1981 Apostolic Letter which is an extended reflection on family life, also emphasises the connection between faith, family life and personal fulfillment. Here I simply want to highlight some of the main connections that he makes.

The first word about human existence in the Christian tradition is that every person is created by God. Since the 19th century the process of industrialisation in the West has influenced the popular understanding of creation, leading people to think about creation primarily in terms of making or manufacture. Whereas this image conveys some aspects of the meaning of creation, the Christian tradition holds something far deeper. To speak about human life as created means that we come into existence in relationship with God. John Paul II spells this out beautifully. He reminds us that God is neither distant from us nor disinterested: rather, our Triune God “lives a mystery of personal loving communion” (no. 11). To be created in the image of God means, therefore, that we come to be in the love of God and find our deepest truth in that communal love. This leads the pope to conclude that: “Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (no. 11).

Men and women express the love that constitutes their deepest identity in many ways: in work, in commitment to society, and in the arts among other ways. Yet the vocation of love is nowhere realised more profoundly than in the love of husband and wife. When a man and a woman discover the love that they have for each other and commit themselves totally, they share in the love of God. John Paul II writes of their love in these words: “the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God” (no. 11). Here, love of one’s spouse, love of God and love of self are intimately connected – a love which Catholics understand as a sacrament. That is, the marriage commitment is an expression of God’s love active in human love – it is not something which is externally imposed. And the communion of love enables the couple to discover new dimensions of their lives.

The fundamental human vocation of love is further expressed in the gift of children. Parents lead children into a communion in which all are able to grow in the love that has brought them together. John Paul II sees growth in love as the family’s mission: “the family has the mission to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love” (no. 17). Fostering the communion of family life requires
self-giving along with a whole range of virtues, of which the pope highlights “a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation” (no. 21). Yet to think of self-giving and personal fulfillment as opposites in this context is to misunderstand human life. Often, it is only in giving of ourselves that we grow in understanding of both our own vocation and the mystery of life itself. The self-giving of parents fosters a communion of love in which all are enabled to grow, and which extends through the generations to include the wider family.

Sadly, marriages do break up irrevocably and families are split. These events bring great pain both to the couple themselves and their children, and the pain extends to the wider circle of their families and friends. Yet, even here, Jesus’ call to love one another endures as couples search for ways of resolving their differences out of love for their children.

John Paul II’s rich account of family life spells out the intimate connection between family life, personal fulfillment and the love of God. We understand family life fully only when we grasp its innate connection to personal fulfillment and the love of God. To see family life as instrumental to our happiness is to misunderstand it badly. It is crucial that we foster a rich view of family life.

III. The church community and families

In conclusion, I want to propose three ways in which the Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Adelaide can further support family life. For the Archdiocesan community, relationships matter - both relationships within the faith community and the community’s relationships with the wider society. This understanding of the significance of relationships for the Catholic community has led the Diocesan Pastoral Council to speak about the church as a ‘family’. My proposals respond to the question of how our faith community can promote family well-being in society. They suggest directions rather than provide fully developed programs: each of them will require additional reflection and action within the community.

The first proposal arises from the major line of thought in this pastoral letter. The assumption that relationships are instrumental to personal happiness inevitably increases the fragility of family life. In Australian culture today, therefore, it is essential that all families cherish family life as the communion of love out of which we all grow. It is only when we cherish our common life that the love between us can grow. What I am calling for here is conversion—a change in the way that we understand our lives. At first glance this suggestion may not seem terribly practical but conversion has powerful effects: through it we appreciate more fully God’s unconditional love for the world and can participate in this love through grace.

Secondly, with the Diocesan Pastoral Council I want to commit our Catholic community to continue to work both with families themselves and with other institutions to strengthen family life. The church’s policies, programs and ministries have an impact on families. It is critical, therefore, that church leaders reflect on the way in which the church can enter into strong partnerships with families. Our Catholic schools have made an immense contribution in this area over the years, fostering the growth of children in a milieu permeated by the love of God. How encouraging it is to see schools and families engaged in this work across the Archdiocese. The task of strengthening family life will continue to challenge Catholic education. In recent years, the Archdiocese and Catholic Education leadership have placed considerable emphasis on developing the relationships between Catholic schools and both their local parish communities and the wider community. My desire is that diocesan agencies, parishes and schools, both individually and together, will reflect further on the way in which they can strengthen family life through their own ministry, asking how their initiatives will support the children and families they serve. By attending to the needs of families in this way, the Catholic community seeks to follow the example of Jesus who welcomed all, particularly those in greatest need.

The social welfare agency Centacare Catholic Family Services provides a wide range of resources including counselling, mediation and education programs for couples, parents and families. They offer counselling and therapy for children, and in particular support for families
affected by intellectual disability, homelessness, mental health issues, as well as drug and alcohol abuse. Centacare also offers excellent opportunities for couples preparing for marriage. These offerings enable couples to reflect about the dynamics of their relationships, including their capacity to communicate and resolve conflicts. In my experience, nearly every couple that takes up this opportunity benefits greatly; the partners grow in appreciation of their relationship and find new ways to approach the challenges of marriage. I want to encourage all engaged couples in the Catholic community to make an appointment with a marriage educator or undertake one of Centacare’s courses.

Thirdly, I want to raise the issue of the tension affecting families, that between the demands of paid work and family life. Many families struggle under economic pressures: the cost of housing, children’s education, and health care among other costs weigh heavily upon them. Under these pressures, couples need time to maintain the quality of their relationship and their family life. I am close to families who struggle to balance family life with work: the tension worries them and is not easily resolved. From my reflection, this tension poses two real challenges: firstly, the challenge of developing a pattern of parenting in which both father and mother are actively involved. This often requires flexibility in work hours, particularly so that fathers can be available for their children. Second, the challenge of a couple discerning the total number of hours that they need to work so that the life of their family will be best served. I know that this tension is not easily resolved but since the development of good family relationships requires time together, it’s crucial that both couples and society as a whole find ways of working toward its resolution.

Conclusion

Family life does present difficulties. Nonetheless it is a great gift, bringing fulfillment of a kind that is rarely surpassed. Cherishing family life as the structure or fabric out of which we live, rather than simply one element within life, is integral to its success. The Catholic understanding of the sacrament of marriage expresses this truth in a profound way: God loves in human love.

Finally, I want to assure you that I pray often for the families of our Archdiocese, for each and every one. I pray that we will grow in love for one another, that our love will bear fruit, and that we will often give thanks for the wonder of God’s presence among us.

Yours in the love of Christ,

+ Philip Wilson DD JCL
Archbishop of Adelaide