



A Selection of Reflections and Readings that may be useful for Home is a Holy Place (Last Updated 17.8.08)

Home

I do not intend to describe for you in minute detail the appearance of the home. That is for you to do. Nor will I paint a portrait of the family that lives inside. They are yours to identify. I will suggest that you will describe the homes and families that are yours in a diversity of ways. Your family will fit a variety of configurations: divorced or separated, widowed, single-parent, stepparent, childless, blended, adoptive, multigenerational, aging. Your homes will be equally diverse in appearance. Most of you will have moved many times.

Very few of you are smiling all the time. Most of your families are scarred to one degree or another by death, disease, alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, spouse-battering, child abuse, lack of communication, quarrelling between generations, quarrelling with in-laws. Most of you find the fabric of your relationships stretched unbearably by the pull of contemporary life. You are oppressed by the pressures of succeeding or of simply getting by, overwhelmed with financial worry, absent from one another's lives because of the sheer number of commitments forced on you by jobs, schools, peer and collegial pressure, duty or the desire for some sort of personal enhancement.

Despite all this, most of you will also look to your home and family as a primary source of nurture and meaning. You will accept the idea that home in some way represents (or should represent) a foundational experience of caring community. Both philosophically and psychologically the concept of home has been explored as a powerful and primal image in which our deepest being is rooted. The home as an image can reflect a sense of identity and meaning-making that contains within itself a clue to the way we understand ourselves and our world.

The term home has religious associations for us as well. In most faiths home connotes a place of ultimate rest and comfort, of belonging and identity, of being with God. This is remarkably true of our Judeo-Christian legacy. To be reminded of this, one need only recall the Psalms with their frequent references to Yahweh's dwelling place.

So for us calling up the concept of home evokes several clusters of ideas and brings into play a spectrum of associative meanings that operate on many levels of our self-awareness. We experience home as representing our collective longings for a stable, caring environment and community. We also experience home on the level of religious consciousness as answering our hearts' cries for meaning and intimacy—"home" is also "homecoming."

At the same time that we usher in these almost archetypal images of home, we also recognize the current reality of our own homes and families. There may be considerable disjuncture between these sets of data. But this gap need not be uncreative. Nor, I think, should we be deterred from looking at our less than ideal life-situations as potential windows through which to touch and be touched by God's presence. Within this lived tension our spiritual lives are cultivated: the tension between the factuality of our daily lives with their monotony, opaqueness, limitations and sorrows, with occasional moments of insight and beauty, and the equally factual but less realized soarings of our hearts. "Home" for each of us is at the lived center of this creative tension. An authentic spiritual life assumes that we start exactly where we are, not in some unattained ideal realm. God cannot find us in any place other than the one in which we find our selves.

Wendy M. Wright. *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007 pp 19-22 (edited)

Holiness

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven so you must also forgive. Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:12-15

The forms and tasks of life are many but there is one holiness, which is cultivated by all who are led by God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor and humble in carrying his cross, that they may deserve to be sharers in his glory. All however, according to their own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith which arouses hope and works through love. Christian married couples and parents, following their own way, should with faithful love, support one another in grace all through life. In a different way, a similar example is given by widows, widowers and single people, who can also greatly contribute to the holiness and activity of the church. In a special way also, those who are weighed down by poverty, infirmity, sickness and other hardships. All Christians, in the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives and through all these, will grow constantly in holiness if they receive all things with faith from the hand of the heavenly Father and cooperate with the divine will, making manifest in their ordinary work the love with which God has loved the world.

Lumen Gentium 41

Holiness is not about having successful children, a tidy house, or even a very solid marriage. Nor is holiness simply about having a routine of family prayer, although that helps. Holiness is about having eyes for God. It is about being ready to respond to God's presence in ways that are generous and brave. Holiness is about seeing beneath the surface of daily events and having the courage to know that God is at work in them even if they don't make sense to us. Holiness is walking every minute with God. Seeking holiness is tough going. Seeking holiness in our homes is particularly difficult. Often it's far easier to be kind to strangers than to those with whom we live, who may have just finished off the milk, taken the last packet of crisps or jumped the queue for the bathroom. It's far more difficult to accept the failures of those whom we love and to whom we have tried to give everything.

Everyone starts off with the hope of being the perfect family. But then reality sets in. All of life's difficulties begin to emerge. It's only when we realise that we are not perfect, that we are never going to be perfect, neither as individuals nor as a family, that the real work of holiness begins. When we accept that something has really gone wrong, when we have that terrible feeling in the pit of our stomach, then we can begin to discover what it is to rely on God, to have eyes for God, to walk each minute with God.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols. Pastoral letter for the feast of the Holy Family 2006

To be holy is simply to be like God. And God is Love. So holiness for a family is mainly about loving. That means it is about ordinary, earthy things like sex, giving birth, breastfeeding, laughing together, shedding tears, giving hugs, wiping snotty noses... They are holy things when they are living things. That does not exclude prayer, of course, but it definitely includes the messiness of daily life in a family.

Quinn, Michael and Terri. *What does God Expect of Parents?* Family Caring Trust, 2001

Love

Families are not fairytales whose last line is “and they all lived happily ever after”. They are places of conflict and stress. But they are also places where we learn to resolve them by honest communication, mutual understanding and forgiveness. The family is where we learn the grammar of emotional intelligence by not giving up when the going gets tough. It’s our ongoing seminar on the meaning of loyalty.

Families are where love is written not in poetry but in prose. What is love? Watch a parent caring for a handicapped child. See a spouse coping with a partner suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Watch a family playing together in a park on a sunny afternoon, or a toddler taking its first steps and falling laughingly into outstretched parental arms. There is a beauty, undemonstrative, unselfconscious, that lives in a thousand small gestures of listening, caring, helping, giving, for no ulterior motive other than the fact that here we are “we” not “I”. The family is where passion, affection and companionship meet in the most intimate of human bondings. It is where, if we are blessed, we become most like God himself, bringing new life into the world through and for the sake of love. It is our first school, a miniature welfare state, a healthcare centre, a tutorial in responsibility. And yes, there is something spiritual about it. It is solitude redeemed.

The prophet Hosea said it in the name of God. “I will betroth you to me for ever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, devotion and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness.” The family is where selves touch and are transformed: life joined to life in love.

Jonathan Sacks. Credo. The

Times. May 2004

Relationships

Our granddaughter arrived in the midst of the first snow of the winter. As I looked into her newly opened eyes I realized that here was most significant event in our whole tortured world. And yet, she simply had no idea how important she was. Perhaps it was possible to be significant without ever knowing that it is true. We babysit for Katie. As I recorded accounts of her days with us, I began to find in my own writing, in my own love for this baby, an image of God’s love for me. I have become convinced that God is far more grandparent than parent. There are none of the concerns, none of the expectations of parenting in grandparenthood, only delight and love for this new little person. Every activity, from napping to lullabies, from first steps to first rides on the swing, became a new insight into the way God loves me. And when I first disagreed with my own daughter about her daughter, I finally understood a God who chooses to remain powerless rather than abort our own growing sense of power. We don’t always choose our images of God, sometimes they choose us. When the God I loved and trusted, the God capable of intervening and protecting me, collapsed with the twin towers, the God who found me was far more loving and far less powerful. We rock in the big blue rocking chair, her blue-gray eyes gazing deeply into mine, as I sing the lullabies my mother once sang, ancient mother-prayers steeped in earth wisdom. Holding my gaze, she begins to sing, a wordless harmony, matching my silences with her own rests, my melodies with her own variations. Song after song, she gently gives voice to the love that holds us both captive, until the little eyes droop in sleep. Do you sing to me, Grandparent God, accepting the wordless prayers I try to voice, the melody I have yet to master, with the same enchanted love that has taken possession of my soul?

Kathleen Chesto. “Know Me, Hold Me, Sing to Me: What My Grandchild Taught Me About God.” Ave Maria Press, 2004

A lay spirituality flourishes when lived out in a spirit of communion - communion with God and with others in the church. God is Trinity and the relationship of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit hints at the structure of the Christian vocation to communion. In a world plagued by alienation and isolation, the Christian message is counter-cultural: we are called to

be interdependent, mutually serving one another, drawing out the gifts of one another. In short, we are called to a life of communion.

Donna Orsuto. The challenge of lay spirituality. Priests and People

We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love each other we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have seen that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

Dorothy Day. The Long Loneliness: an autobiography. San Francisco, 1981 p285-286.

As living members of the family, children contribute in their own way to making their parents holy. For they will respond to the kindness of their parents with sentiments of gratitude, with love and trust. They will stand by them as children should when hardships overtake their parents and old age brings its loneliness. Widowhood, accepted bravely as a continuation of the marriage vocation, should be esteemed by all.(8) Families too will share their spiritual riches generously with other families. Thus the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church,(9) and as a participation in that covenant, will manifest to all men Christ's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church. This the family will do by the mutual love of the spouses, by their generous fruitfulness, their solidarity and faithfulness, and by the loving way in which all members of the family assist one another.

Gaudium et

Spes #48

Challenges

It may be hard for us to think of God as someone who wrestles with us, but this can be an excellent image for describing the relationship with God which many people experience when their lives feel difficult or painful. Wrestling can be dangerous, people get bruised and hurt, but there is a wonderful closeness and intimacy about wrestling.

The key is what we do with the wounding we have experienced. What does it say about us? What does it say about a God who lets us be wounded?

A God who protects us from human pain would be a God who treated us like fragile children. Our God, the wrestler of Genesis, is a God who calls us to become adult men and women, strong, resourceful, and independent, qualities of maturity that generally come only to those who can face their own vulnerability and from it grow in compassion and understanding.

God invites us to see during difficult times that the only pathway to human maturity is through suffering and pain, that like broken bones that heal, we can grow stronger in the broken places. Isn't that the model of human growth He has shown us in his only Son who passed through rejection and death to new life?

All the pain and heartache, all the anxiety and struggle we experience would be for nothing if we were to become tough, hardened, self-protective persons, bitter and always on our guard. The silver lining in the dark clouds we go through has got to be the possibility that we are being stretched, sometimes unwillingly, into becoming more flexible sensitive persons, people who have learned through their own suffering to be compassionate, understanding and forgiving towards themselves and others.

Suffering is not something glorious, not something to be accepted too easily. We need to protest about it, try to lessen it for ourselves and each other, but there are many hurts in life which cannot be avoided.

Learning to live graciously and lovingly with them may be a long time in coming. If we can manage to do so, it is a huge step towards freeing ourselves from the damage of the past and opening ourselves fully to the life of God.

Believing, Belonging by James J. Young

Adapted from Divorcing,