

From Nazareth to Now: The Mission of the Family

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One of the big buzz words in Church circles these days is the word ‘mission.’ Mission, we have heard, is not simply one aspect of the Church’s life. It *is* her life. Mission is the Church’s very ground and essence, because her existence flows from the side of Christ, who is God’s sent one, God’s *shaliach*, the incarnate ‘messenger of the divine counsel’ (Is 9:6 LXX). Mission is about sending and being sent. As the *apostolos* of God, Christ has been sent – *apostell-oed* - by the Father. And Christ in turn has sent out – *apostell-oed* - his apostles with the self-same saving mission: ‘*Just as the Father sent me, so too I am sending you*’ (Jn 20:21). The Church is what it is by virtue of being sent by Christ, by virtue, in other words, of its expressly divine mission.

In a similar way, the Christian family has been recognised in recent decades as an agent of mission, indeed, as constituted by mission. Some of the most profound theological reflections along these lines can be found in the writings of two current Cardinals, Angelo Scola and Marc Ouellet.¹ These theologians see a remarkable analogy between the Church and the family that runs deeper than appearances. According to Ouellet, ‘Christ and the Church... find in the couple and family a place of sacramental incarnation...’ (193), which means that where there is a Christian family, there is the Holy Spirit and his gifts. The love that is at work in a Christian family, the love that is at stake there, is not just a human love, but ‘the supernatural love of Christ for the Church.’ (194) It is precisely this love which ‘is entrusted to the couple and the family to be lived, celebrated, served, and handed down to new generations.’ (194) The identity of the Christian couple, blessed by God and called to holiness, is an ecclesial identity ‘in the sense that their relationship itself becomes a

¹ Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, tr. M. K. Borras, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005; Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, tr. P. Milligan and L. M. Cicone, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006.

sacrament of the objective sacramental relationship between Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride the Church.’ (194-5)

The mission of the family, therefore, is not simply adjunct to the mission of the Church. Nor is the family simply an instrument of the Church’s mission. Rather the mission of the family ‘consists above all in the dynamic and organic extension of a sacramental community’ which has been ‘inserted within the objective structure of the Church.’ (195) It is not by doing something extra, something over and above itself, that a family undertakes its ecclesial and missionary task. Rather it is simply by being itself, by being true to what it means to be husband and wife, parents and children, that a family evangelises the world and sets salvation in motion. This is what Pope John Paul II was getting at in that oft quoted saying: ‘Family, *become* what you *are*....’ (FC 17) Or as Marc Ouellet explains, ‘This community [of the family] **in and of itself** serves life and society, and undertakes an educative and evangelizing task....’ (195, emphasis added)

Throughout Christian history, this notion of fulfilling one’s mission simply by being one’s self, true to one’s fundamental identity, seems to me to have a vital prominence. One of the earliest movements in which we see this idea first occurring, perhaps surprisingly, was monasticism, and especially the monastic movements of the deserts of Palestine and Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries. Historians have sometimes painted the picture of these early ascetic movements as being made up of rather odd and eccentric types, skinny, bearded old men who as idealistic young adults ran away into the desert to get away from the evils of worldly society and the responsibilities of family and work, who denied their bodies with a harsh regime of fasting and prayer and vigils, and who were prone to dualistic doctrines in which things like marriage and parenthood and the body were regarded as suspicious, occupying at best a marginal status.

It has to be admitted that, here and there, there were extremes. But the primary reality is that monasticism began as a movement in which the adherents were simply seeking to live out the full truth of their new identity and calling as disciples of the Lord Jesus

Christ.² They weren't seeking to *escape* who they were. They were seeking to *become* who they were: disciples of Christ, saints of God, citizens of heaven. It is true that in abandoning their 'ordinary' way of life, in pursuing this 'strange' existence in the wilderness, they were saying something critical about the false, secularising culture that dominated life in the city. They were saying 'no' to an idolatrous slavery to greed and self-service. They were saying 'no' to the economic and political manipulation of the poor by the powerful. But the monks of the desert were not just saying 'no.' They were also saying 'yes.' They were saying yes to the God who calls men and women to sell all, to deny themselves, and to follow him. They were saying yes to the God whose values more often than not challenge worldly culture, whose logic appears to it as foolishness, whose way of life in the world is fraught with stigma and peril, but promises ultimately to lead to joy and abundance.

And so, hearing this call, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of Christian men and women flocked to the desert, to create a new culture, with its own language and art, its own stories and songs, its own work and worship.³ And the culture that was born there changed the world.⁴ And it's that culture, that monastic culture of the desert, that I'd like to propose to you today as the native culture of Christian mission, and the

² See D. J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 1-19.

³ As an example of population figures, the monastery of Pachomius at Tabanensis on the Nile in Egypt had a population of some 3000 in Pachomius' lifetime (early 4th c.), and grew to as many as 7000 in the sixth century. In the year 1000 there were some 7000 monastic establishments in the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople was the site for some 325 of those. See P. Charanis, 'The Monk as an Element of Byzantine Society', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 25 (1971), 61-84.

⁴ 'Immediately after it had come into being monasticism spread from Egypt over the whole of the Christian East.... Before long these ascetics began to dominate Church life, at least in the East. For whole multitudes, in a society which, while possessing compulsory magistrature and military service, allowed the ordinary citizen no say at all in political affairs, sought in the monasteries as much the opportunity to give free development to their personality as to adopt a radically Christian way of life. No emperor succeeded, either by law or by any other means, in stemming this exodus of the best members of the community.

For it was precisely the best who could not resist the attraction of this new way of life. They all received their schooling from the monks: the two Gregories, Eustathius, and Basil. It was Basil who made the Egyptian ideal practicable for cultured Greeks: his Rule is still followed by the Greek monks. But the same was true of the Westerners: Jerome journeyed to the East and remained there as a monk in Bethlehem, with his friends the aristocratic Roman ladies who also became *moniales* (nuns). Ambrose and Augustine introduced the monastic way of life into their own Episcopal houses; Cassian brought it to Marseilles, Honoratus to the isle of Lerins, unknown monks to Britain, and Patrick to Ireland.....

The man who rendered possible for the Latins the sober ideal of the desert fathers, in a land where there were no deserts at an hour's distance from the towns, and no Egyptian sun, this man was, in the beginning of the sixth century, the young Roman nobleman, Benedict of Nursia. His wise *Regula*... became the abiding code for those communities which, in still more difficult times and in isolated countries, ensured the continuity of Early Christian culture and made possible the culture of the Middle Ages.' F. van der Meer and C. Mohrmann, *Atlas of the Early Christian World* (London: Nelson, 1966), #586.

native culture of the Christian family, because history has shown that it is a culture that has the power to transform the world and to infuse it with the presence of God. It seems to me that despite the very real differences, there is in fact an underlying connection between the ancient monastic culture born in the desert, and the culture desperately in need of recovery in and through Christian families today. To that end I'd like to suggest five world-transforming features of this culture, whose value can never be taken for granted, but must ever be cultivated, guarded and promoted:

First, there was the patient practice of embodied spiritual disciplines: daily prayer, the reading of Scripture, psalmody, fasting, almsgiving, communal worship. All faithfully, reverently, and joyfully entered into as a way of life capable of incarnating holiness in the world. And notice how all of these disciplines involve the body: Christianity cannot be thought about. It must be lived.

Second, there was an attitude of quiet restful hopefulness, not because the monks were so turned in on themselves that the world did not matter, but because they knew that ultimately the world is in God's hands, that prayer and simple faithfulness to Christ through the practice of obedience, chastity, poverty and stability do more to change the world for the better than the fluster and bluster of spiritual worry and social activism.

Third, there was the emergence of institutional forms aimed essentially at extending 'Good Samaritan-like' hospitality, the formation of places of rest and healing for the sick and vulnerable, who otherwise were left to fend for themselves.⁵ Sociologists have cited Christian social welfare, and especially the institutional provision of care for the sick and dying, as one of the key factors contributing to the massive growth and spread of Christianity in the early centuries.⁶

Fourth, in a similar way, early Christian monasteries became the main hubs of liberal education and humane culture, privileged and devoted centres of dialogue, research,

⁵ See Andrew T. Crislip, *From Monastery to Hospital: Christian Monasticism and the Transformation of Health Care in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Also M. Francis Mannion, 'Benedictine Economics and the Challenge of Modernity', *American Benedictine Review* 47/1 (1996), 14-36.

⁶ See, e.g., Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins), 1996.

thought, and learning, all conducted in an unhurried climate of prayer balanced with work and rest.

Fifth, and this was perhaps the most attractive feature of early Christian monasticism: there was a total lack of self-promotion. Monasticism was marked by the disinterested, take it or leave it manner in which it went about its business. This does not mean that it lacked passion or urgency, nor that that it was unconcerned with the troubles of human society. Rather it was content to let its witness stand for itself, and leave the whole matter of self-justification to politicians and economists and those with more worldly ambitions. Monks went about their daily life and habits with a faith-filled confidence that they were involved in God's good work of the salvation of the world. Unapologetic, unashamed, they were not driven by the demand to justify their counter-cultural existence, to debase their way of life by reducing its value to the categories of social productivity and utilitarian success.

Each of these five features of monastic culture embody a mode of existence that properly characterises the Christian family, in as much as each somehow expresses something interior to the very being of the family as domestic church and primary seat of human culture. How they may come to be expressed today, what specific shape they will take, must of course vary from family to family. But where any of them is missing, something essential to the native culture of the Christian family is missing, and it cannot be itself.

Take the last point, the fifth one, for example, the way monastic culture renounced all calls for self-justification. The importance of this point, it seems to me, and the way it applies to families, cannot be over-emphasised in our aggressively utilitarian culture. There is a tendency sometimes in our preaching, planning, and parish programs to relativise the value of the family and make its justification reside solely in what the family members accomplish in the parish. Fathers and mothers, already burdened by the demands of work and family, not to mention their own sins, can sometimes come to mass or read the weekly bulletin only to hear the message that they are not doing enough as far as all the parish programs go, while the simplest duties of their calling - prayer together and with their children, regular use of the sacraments, faithful service in their workplaces, generosity in their monetary offerings, frugality in living,

provision for their aging parents - all these are often left unmentioned. Yet the import of the parallel I have been drawing between the family and monastic culture, the import also of the claims mentioned earlier by Ouellet and Scola, suggest that just by being itself, just by spouses and children fulfilling the ecclesial and sacramental reality that their communion constitutes, they are thereby 'doing the work' of evangelising the world and building up a culture of love.

Too often family members are drawn away from their familial vocation into what are regarded as more important and useful activities - church meetings, parish programs, outreach events, fundraising activities – whose ultimacy is justified and promoted in the name of 'mission.' Important though such activities are, they should not be promoted at the expense of spousal and family communion whose value has been granted sacramental and supernatural status by Christ himself. As Scola argues, 'The ecclesial being of the Christian family is not limited to explicitly ecclesial activities, but includes personal and social tasks because baptism and matrimony consecrate the whole personal and social being of the married couple to Christ and the Church.' (201-2) Needless to say, the strength and quality of spousal and familial communion itself depends on its ecclesial and sacramental 'embeddedness'; its depth of incorporation and growing participation in the life of Christ and his Spirit given and received in baptismal and eucharistic communion and renewed and invigorated through the sacrament of reconciliation.

The twentieth century has seen the unprecedented emergence of a large number of lay renewal movements. Just think of the Legion of Mary, Focolare, Opus Dei, L'Arche, Communion and Liberation, the Emmanuel Community, the Neocatechumenal Way, just to name a few. One way of interpreting their appearance is by relating them to ancient monasticism, with which they share many similar traits and ideals. Despite the obvious difference that ancient monasticism was made up exclusively of celibates, whereas the modern lay movements largely thrive by the presence of married members, they both share as their basic focus the desire for their members to live more fully and faithfully their God-given baptismal identity. They both entail a disdain for the superficial and mediocre and a lively, daring pursuit for Christian authenticity. They both exemplify what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre described as 'local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life

can be sustained' amidst a darkening tide of barbarism.⁷ Yes, they all call for a form of existence over and above the ordinary. But that is precisely what being a Christian involves: something extraordinary.

Here, perhaps, the idea of 'mission' should be supplemented with the idea of 'witness', for a witness has the character of someone who has seen and experienced something extraordinary, and whose life has thereby been unforgettably changed as a result. As is well known, the word witness in the New Testament translates the Greek word for *martyr*. To be a witness therefore is not simply to tell other people about the Lord. It is to see God, to apprehend with Stephen, the Church's first martyr, 'heaven open' and the Son of Man reigning in glory (Acts 7:56). Angelo Scola points out that the language of love, as it occurs in both marriage and in the Church, is ultimately a language of witness (Scola, 396-7), in as much as it involves me responding to what has been given to me, rather than making something up for myself. Pope Paul VI expressed the special need in our time for a renewed theology of witness: 'Modern man', he said, 'listens more willingly to witnesses than [to] teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses.' Children and teenagers, above all, can tell the difference between a parent or teacher who is a real witness, and one who is not, for a real witness speaks from experience, from conviction, and from the heart.

Our era closely parallels the situation of the early Christian witnesses whose mission 'programs' were initiated through holiness and sealed by suffering and blood. It is time for a new 'white-robed army of martyrs' to arise: and they must arise not only in the form of priests and bishops, religious and theologians, but in the form of husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. But they must do so not by being something other than what they are. As Ouellet reminds us, the very presence of the Christian family in the world is its own witness; it is not a means to some other end. Keep the Christian family, and you keep God in the world. Lose it, and not even the Church will help. Of course, the dichotomy - 'family, or Church' - is a false one. My point is that the Church and the family are mutually inseparable, and their mission coincides, a point reiterated in the teaching of John Paul II when he asserted that the future of humanity basically stands or falls with the family.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 2nd ed.), 263.

Through the beautiful witness of holy couples and holy children, contemporary society is provided with a most concrete, human, and accessible point of contact with that 'great mystery' (Ouellet, 204), the nuptial mystery that is Christ and his Church. Through such families, the life-giving humanity of Jesus, without whose redeeming love no human being can truly live, is colourfully diffused in every walk of human existence and takes up living space in this world.