

Ushaw Meeting October 2006

Families are holy, even in the midst of crisis, tension, and difficulty concluded participants at *Releasing Formidable Energy*, a symposium to explore the spirituality of marriage and family life, held between October 20th – 22nd at St Cuthbert's College, Ushaw, near Durham.

David Thomas, lay advisor to the US Bishops at the 1980 World Synod on the Family, told the symposium that homes are holy places because the whole of God's creation is filled with God's presence. "Awareness is the starting point for all spirituality. There is a clear challenge here for families because they are so busy, yet busy people can still be spiritual because they have developed practices for remaining aware, being present to God, to each other. The ordinary things families do - the way for example that they care for and serve one another - are holy and important to God. Families are all the time bringing forth God's life more fully into creation."

The challenge of seeing God in the midst of family difficulties was addressed by Kathleen Chesto, another of the keynote speakers. It's not the mess that is holy of itself, she said, but the people we become through the especially poignant challenges often faced in our family lives. "There are two lasting bequests we give our children: the first is roots and the second is wings. We root them in our love, our tradition, our faith, our family and then we give them the greatest gift of all: we let them go. They are free to make their own choices and they often choose other than we would have them choose."

"We are not good parents if *they* turn out well – we are good parents if *we* turn out well through the process of parenting. God gave us this for *our* sanctification; are we becoming less selfish, more spiritual, more in touch, more aware of the greatness of creation? Through the process of parenting are we becoming holy? It's through the pain and the chaos, through the cracks in our lives, that God's light enters deeply within us."

Thomas Knieps - Port le Roi, holder of the INTAMS chair in Marital Spirituality at the University of Leuven, Belgium called for new theological models for conjugal and family spirituality. It was vital, he said, to differentiate between marital and family spirituality. "In the past conjugal and family experience coincided. Parents died much younger 100 years ago, often as their last child was reaching maturity. That is no longer the case. Now we need to pay attention to the spirituality of couples both before marriage and after the children have left home."

As a new theological model, Prof Knieps – Port le Roi suggested a "covenant" spirituality for spouses and families, rooted in the notion that "first of all we are brothers and sisters of Christ and thus brother and sister to each other, before we are husband and wife or son and daughter of our father and mother."

More than 120 delegates including married couples, single people, priests, and theologians attended *Releasing Formidable Energy* which was organised by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales as part of their *Celebrating Family: Blessed, Broken, Living Love* initiative, the response to *Listening 2004: My Family, My Church*, a conversation in which 15,000 Catholic families shared their experiences of life and faith.

"Families actually live a great deal of holiness in the love they live but they have never named it and claimed it as such," said Bishop John Hine, Chairman of the Committee for Marriage & Family Life of the Bishops' Conference. "When you read the Listening 2004 report the generous self-giving of time, attention, love, forgiveness, affirmation, support and so on jump out of the pages. But none of this was identified as family spirituality! We clearly need to do more to identify and celebrate God's presence at home."

The symposium ended with delegates devising new strategies for promoting marital and family spirituality in the parish. These included the writing of new resources for priests and catechists to help them identify and affirm the value of family at key contact points such as sacramental preparation. Also suggested was a greater emphasis on family-centred vocations of marriage and parenting, and

identification of volunteers within parishes who, with appropriate support and training, could animate a greater awareness of marital and family spirituality.

“We have a great deal of material to work with now in preparing for the launch of *Home is a Holy Place in 2007*”, said Elizabeth Davies, Marriage and Family Life project officer for the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. “The symposium has not only highlighted key themes in the spirituality of the home but also a number of areas where we must focus more attention.”

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

- *Home is a Holy Place* is the second stage of *Celebrating Family: Blessed, Broken, Living Love*, the plan of collaborative action adopted by the Catholics Bishops in May 2005 in response to *Listening 2004: My Family my Church*. It has the tangible aim of developing practical strategies by which the parish church can both nourish and harness the holiness of home.
- *Not Easy, But Full of Meaning: Catholic Family Life in 2004*, the report on what families said during *Listening 2004* is available online at: <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/listening2004/>
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[←Previous](#) | [Next→](#)

Return to [IFIN Index](#)