

The Religion At The Hearth

By Most Rev. W. McNeely, D.D.

Catholic Truth Society of Ireland No.fam201a (1943)

In an age of rapid, nay, even violent changes, we should like to assure ourselves that what is best in Christian civilization be not submerged. At times, indeed, the very framework of society gets a rude shock, and thinking people become thoroughly concerned about the future. Some of our institutions that perhaps to generations of human beings seemed unassailable and destined to last until the end of all things, have disappeared with tragic suddenness. Others have weathered the storms but bear the marks of centuries of change. The deeper their roots strike into the soil of humanity, the greater the admiration and veneration they inspire. In endeavouring to trace their origin, we may find that we have to go to the dawn of history, or perhaps to a time that may be aptly enough described as "In the beginning." So ancient, indeed, that the story would have long ago faded from the memory of man, did we not get it from the mind of the Creator Himself revealed through the inspired writer in Genesis: —

"And God created man to His own image:

to the image of God He created him:

male and female he created them. And God blessed them, saying:

‘Increase and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ...’

Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh."

In a word, the family is of divine origin. It is the plan of Divine Providence for the continued existence of the human race — a grand scheme in which man co-operates with the Creator in the mightiest of His works, in peopling the earth here, and heaven hereafter. One will readily understand, then, and appreciate the various definitions and descriptions that are often applied to this the most ancient of societies.

It is called the corner-stone of the human edifice:

the pivot of society:

the shrine of human affections:

the ark of salvation:

the cradle of the nation:

the foundation of all societies.

The heart of the nation is truly said to be in the home, where are the springs of the nation's life, the fountain from which it is refreshed and renewed. And let us add that the best guarantee of civilization is in the sanctity and welfare of family life; the future of generations depends upon it and is largely determined by it. Such language, if true for all, has an especial significance when applied to the Christian family. If Genesis tells us enough to make us reverence marriage, the family, its sacred relationships and purpose, the teaching and example of our Divine Lord give us a new doctrine — the higher Christian ideal of matrimony and family life. You will understand when

I say that family life is now sacramental life, and that what God joins, He seals with a sacramental seal bearing the inscription:

"Until death do us part."

The family is now patterned on that into which Jesus was born, in which He lived for well-nigh His full time on earth, to which the great Pope Leo XIII, of happy memory, exhorted the modern world to turn its eyes, there to behold the "noble picture of a divinely-constituted family in which all men might see the most perfect example of home life, of holiness, and of every virtue."

The Christian ideal of the family and home life we owe to our Lord. He taught first by example, laying the foundations of the Christian home, and living the simple home life. At a later period, he explained, partly for the benefit of an adulterous generation of His own day, what God intended the union of man and woman in wedlock to be from the beginning. He did not stop there, however, but included it amongst the Sacraments that He specially instituted to help man on his way to eternal salvation; so that the solemn mutual consent to life-long partnership pronounced before God's altar and received by the Church's official witness, the sacred minister of Jesus Christ, is now the symbol of inward grace; the family is based on the sacrament of matrimony; the home is the environment of sacramental life. To His Church, accordingly, Christ entrusted this as well as the other sacraments, to her the special care and guidance of family life. In her teaching and practice today she is true to her divine commission as in the earliest centuries; to her trust she has been faithful as the Catholic tradition shows; and if she has lost in the course of the centuries many of those once baptised into her fold, ay, even entire flocks and nations, she has had to make the sacrifice rather than be false to that same commission.

It is only to be expected that where the faith became dimmed or altogether lost, the Catholic ideal suffered too. The new communions set up failed to protect the marriage-tie or the Christian family. The old Catholic ideals were losing ground as society began to be parcelled out into sects or Churches that soon found themselves powerless to enforce Christian discipline; authority in morals went with authority in faith, and the era of the "isms" was ushered in: individualism, rationalism, naturalism, or the newer paganism, industrialism, feminism, communism, etc., until in our day a lamentable ignorance of Christian family life and the home, its rights and responsibilities, its sacred honour, its stability and permanence, pervades masses of human beings that still go by the name of Christian, that still retain, perhaps, some religious instinct and Christian sentiment, but the walls of whose family life have suffered a widely opened breach from evils that the infant Church had to conquer in the days of Imperial Rome, evils against which there is only one Church today that, by universal consent, raises her voice and wages continual warfare; one Church that stands four-square against a rising tide of paganism, in its determination to fight and conquer in the twentieth century and thus bring modern society back to Christ, evils that she successfully fought and conquered before she was many centuries old.

Undoubtedly the passing decades leave their impress on home life. Whether for good or ill depends on the character of the age. The period within the memory of those who are still hale and hearty has been one of transitions, of violent upheavals, material and moral. Social systems have suffered a break-up, and a noticeable decay of reverence has manifested itself. We cannot be blind to the fact of an ever-growing spirit of independence — shall I say self-sufficiency — amongst the youth of both sexes; of an eagerness to shake themselves free from moral restraint and parental control; to be allowed to "go on their own," as they say; in short, a want of dutifulness in the young. There is the

whirl and excitement of modern life, a persistent and restless pursuit of sense-pleasures. There is a yearning for the wider and freer life as well as the powerful allurements of the attractions that an age of luxury can afford. One is conscious of a prevailing lack of seriousness, a disposition to glide on the surface of life without probing its depths, an indifferentism to the things in life that matter. There is an incessant whirl of out-door amusements or round of giddy engagements that leave no time for the restful calm of the home. There is a love of luxury and ease foreign to the robust and hardy qualities of the religious spirit of our fathers and grandfathers; a running-away from the duties that require sacrifice or self-control; a reluctance to entertain a thought of self-denial or voluntary penance in the good old-fashioned sense. All this tends to blunt the edge of the Christian conscience.

It is scarcely to be wondered at, then, that so many fail to grasp the Christian teaching about marriage, the family and the home; so many enter upon the holy state without a thought of its responsibilities and duties. It is too much to expect such people to realise the supernatural destiny of the child and the part that the earthly home must play in fitting it for an eternal home. Many of these might arouse nothing more than a sense of pity in us. But for another class — I speak of some women, very few, if any, in Ireland — who affect to despise motherhood and home duties as being a sort of slavery that is beneath the attention of "intellectual" members of the sex, one cannot help entertaining a feeling akin to contempt.

It would be a catastrophe if the business of home-making, which, for the great mass of women, must for all time be their highest vocation, were considered as something to which they might not seriously address themselves. Any off-shoot of ultra-feminism propagating any such view would be a menace to society. Having dwelt upon features of our age that weaken family life and make inroads upon the true Christian home, it is refreshing to hearken back to the teaching of St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians. The Apostle teaches the doctrine of the Christian family based on the sacrament of matrimony, and the mutual relationships, rights and duties of the little society that God intended to flourish in the home. "This is a great sacrament, but I speak in Christ and in the Church." (Ephesians 5:32) How sacred the marriage-tie that symbolizes the union of Christ and His Church.

The Apostle again: (Ephesians 5:22 to 6:4)

"Let women be subject to their husbands as in the Lord..." "Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the Church..." "Children, obey your parents in the Lord... Honour thy father and thy mother... And you, fathers, provoke not your children to anger: but bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord."

These mighty sentences help us to understand the religious ceremony, the nuptial blessing, the solemnity of the occasion as the young couple, with hands clasped before the altar of God, pledge mutual trust and life-long fidelity. They are entering upon a holy state, about to set up a little home, to face the world together, to share their joys and sorrows (for tribulations may await such), to belong to each other and to God. Theirs they mean to be a happy home, a home that will have God's blessing. There shall reign domestic peace, devotedness, pure affection and reverence. The religion on which it is founded they hope to be their truest consolation, the source of the graces and helps needed as the years roll on. The husband will be the protector and provider like Joseph at Nazareth. The thought of the home will spur him on to greater efforts, to be patient in trials, to resist

temptations to squander what should be spent on the home. He will forget labour and fatigue in the smiling welcome that awaits him as he returns from toil or duty abroad.

As the little community grows he will watch over it with anxious care. He will forget self in those whom he loves. His simpler and nobler side, hidden perhaps to those who meet him out-of-doors, will manifest itself in the family circle. Strengthened by the grace of the sacrament he will be faithful to the office of parenthood, which is, in very truth, a divine mission, having entrusted to it the care and training of the future citizens of heaven. The Saviour's loving invitation; although addressed to all, has a special meaning for parents:

"Suffer the little children to come unto Me."

Parents, guardians, educators, take heed, for in these words you have the Saviour asserting His claim to the little ones, who, therefore, have a divine right to a Christian training and education which shall enable them to be, in very truth, His. Their angels, He reminds you, see the face of the Father in Heaven, angels whom He assigned to them to be their guardians. Take heed, parents, that you be not of those on whom the Saviour pronounces woe for scandalizing His little ones. They are at the mercy of the scandal-giver, for they cannot defend themselves. Their fate is, in great measure, in their parents' hands. The Saviour in Heaven is no less concerned about them than He was when on earth He took them in His arms and caressed them. He blesses them now from His Heavenly throne, and is glorified beyond words as often as on bended knees, with hands joined, they speak to God and address Him as "Our Father who art in Heaven."

The child needs a home. It must have the example of good parents if it is to be good. There is no substitute for the home and the home influence. There the first and most lasting impressions are received. There the first teacher of the race, the mother, schools her charge; other teachers may build on the foundations laid by her, but it must not be forgotten that she, more than any other, has the opportunities of training, moulding, educating in her hands. The school may co-operate, supplement, but the school is not a home. On the parents it depends whether the natural powers of the children get a fair chance to develop; on them, too, it depends whether the grace of baptism is allowed to bear the fruit that God meant it to. If children are to grow up to be good Christians, they must live in a good home, cared for and watched over by loving and virtuous parents.

Around the hearth the most beautiful virtues are learned:

the lesson of unselfishness, so necessary for the members of the little society of the home as well as for the members of the bigger society of the world; the lesson of helpfulness and service to others, so necessary for worthy citizenship. The family is, in the best sense, a socializing influence, where the interests of individuals are subordinated to the common weal; where authority and liberty are most harmoniously blended. The family's the thing: the home's the thing. The State looks to it for the training of its future citizens in the virtue of truthfulness and honesty. The Church looks to it to teach her children reverence for sacred things, piety and the fear of God. If the home be the training ground, it is in the world that the contest takes place.

The world tests the quality of the home training. The business of life calls for firmness and grit. "Life," as the poet says, "is real, life is earnest." Hard work, suffering and sacrifice must ever be the lot of the majority of human beings, even under the most favourable circumstances. And yet some theorists insist that the world is to be pictured to the child mind as a garden of pleasure. They want to eliminate all mention or suggestion of sacrifice and effort, of self-denial or self-control. The path

of life is to be made smooth, the acquisition of knowledge a sheer delight, home and school life generally one long-drawn-out entertainment.

Such ideas do not indicate healthy thinking. They ignore realities, and are even harmful, inasmuch as they lay no stress on the necessity of salutary discipline, on the necessity of the exercise of due authority on the part of parents and educators, and leave youth but poorly equipped to resist the temptations of the real world, which may not turn out to be the beautiful place in which to be happy that pampered youth is led to believe. Yes, parents must not be blind to the truth in this matter. If they do not themselves show the example of, but on the contrary recoil from, sacrifice and effort in their own lives, and indulge every whim and fancy in their boys and girls, they may be preparing a generation that will embitter their parents' old age, that will not even understand the meaning of reverence and respect for parental or any other kind of control, that will have no respect for obedience, even when it is demanded by those whom by nature they should love; a generation so utterly consumed by the craving for self-gratification, weakening and demoralizing, as to sap the foundation of character, lower, the standard of public and private morality, bring disgrace to many homes, and multiply the institutions that are filled with the wreckage of humanity. The spirit of Christ must ever be opposed to the spirit of the world, and if the home is to fulfil its mission of training souls for eternity, there can be no doubt as to which spirit should influence it. It was not without reason that Christ preached constantly the need of self-denial, that He counselled restraint even in lawful pleasures.

Christian mothers, it is to you that the Church looks, on you rests her hope of stemming the evils of our time, principally the shamelessness of much of what calls itself fashion in art, literature, dress, and amusements. You have sons and daughters to bring up as good Christian men and women, as worthy citizens, as devout and loyal members of Holy Church. Yours is a noble vocation, entitling you to a unique place in the Catholic fold. You have the example of Mary, who guided the steps of her Boy at Nazareth. To her the Church recommends you as your protector, patron and model. Your privilege is great, your responsibility is great too. Speaking generally, the business of home-making is your true life-work, a noble vocation that requires the finest qualities of head and heart. It is a task to fill your life and heart, it is a task that requires a sustained effort of service. It is you that can make the nation truly Catholic.

The home needs you; there you reign. You should be relieved of other cares, especially of the necessity of working outside your home. Your whole time and attention are needed for the welfare of the family. It is for you to see that the home influence, which is the strongest and most lasting, is also the noblest and purest. Your Irish heritage carries with it an unsullied reputation for womanly dignity and purity; Christian reserve has been in the past — and we pray that the future may not witness any lowering of the standard — a mark of Irish maidenhood; the domestic virtues the boast of Irish civilization. Irish Catholic mothers appear to have seen in their own task a reproduction of Mary's life at Nazareth; they have been the mainstay and bulwark of the simple Irish Catholic home, with its emblems of faith and fatherland, its Christian salutations, its family prayer, its awful reverence for the Holy Mass, the faith preserver in the penal days; the Irish Catholic home, the replica of Nazareth, the nursery of religious vocations, the sanctuary of the faith, the shrine of Irish good-nature and kindness, the well-spring of a pure race.

How many Irish saints could express themselves in words similar to those of the Cure of Ars when asked how he had acquired such a love for prayer:

"After God, it was the work of my dear mother, she was so good. Virtue passes from the heart of a mother to the hearts of her children who do willingly what they see her do." Who has not heard of Augustine and Monica, his saintly mother, the story of whose influence over her erring son will be read as long as Christian literature is prized? "It is in stumbling over the prayer," says a French author, "taught him by his mother in childhood days that many a man, perhaps for the first time in years, has turned his thoughts to heaven and finds his soul flooded by pious and tender memories, and takes a great resolve to desire the recompense of meeting her one day in heaven."

Happy the man who has a happy Christian home. Be it humble or grand, he is rich. A man may work abroad, but he lives at home. If his native land denies him the comfort of a home, he will cross ocean or mountain or desert to find some spot fit to live in, where he may enjoy the blessing of a home. It is a craving of the human heart. How pathetic the fate of a country that has to witness the break-up of its homes — "a brave peasantry, the country's pride," — and the scattering of its families. Recall the famine, evictions, the "clearances" throughout our own land, the wreckage of more than half a million homes in the short space of half a century. Here in Dublin and in other cities far away, many of them found a shelter. But did they get what might, with any show of reason, be called a homestead? Tens of thousands found themselves helpless in the drift of modern life. They tried to exist under the grind of industrialism, they reared families and continue to rear them under the most appalling conditions of overcrowded and insanitary tenements — conditions that render decent family life a triumph of Christian fortitude; and yet, wonderful to relate, they have not allowed the injustice of this world to blind them to the justice and goodness of God, to whom they have remained ever faithful; and they await with Christian courage and resignation the dawn of the day when some mighty prophet of legislative and social reform, shall, like another Moses, lead them from the house of bondage into the promised land.
