

INTRODUCING :

HOME IS



...a Holy Place

Marriage & Family Life Project Office
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document was first drafted in response to the deliberations of participants during the *Releasing Formidable Energy* symposium at Ushaw College in October 2006. The original text was refined by diocesan coordinators of marriage and family life ministry and symposium group facilitators in February 2007, critiqued by a small group of theologians in October 2007 and subsequently rewritten in December 2007. The

working group have monitored the changes throughout this process. Special thanks go to Richard Hardy, Church and Community Development Manager at Care for the Family, for facilitating the February 2007 meeting and to Professor Jeff Astley for his invaluable assistance during the final stages of preparing the text.

Working Group Members

Bishop John Hine, Chair of the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life

Alex Anderson, Director of Operations and Quality Control, Marriage Care

Jeff Astley, Director, North of England Institute for Christian Education

Anne Ballard, Chair, Family Life Commission, Archdiocese of Cardiff

Veronica Murphy, Secretary, Department for Catechesis & Evangelisation, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

Sharon O'Donnell, Adult RE Advisor, Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle

Linda Pennington, RE Advisor for Parish Catechetics, Diocese of Leeds

Teresa Saunders, Marriage Care and Catholic People's Weeks

Breda Theakston, Family Life Ministry Coordinator, Diocese of Leeds

David Thomas, Co-Director, Bethany Family Institute & Professor of Family Ministry, Dominican University, USA

Susan Tym, Marriage and Family Life Coordinator, Diocese of Hallam

David Wells, Director of Religious Education, Diocese of Plymouth

Elizabeth Davies, Marriage & Family Life Project Officer, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

Art Director: Paolo Albertazzi, email: pa@boydemusic.com

Illustrations by Angela Albertazzi.

© 2008 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

This document is published by the Marriage and Family Life Project Office

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

39 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1BX

Printed by Wellington Press, Surrey.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or stored or transmitted by any means or in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Additional copies of this document and supporting materials may be downloaded free of charge from

www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk



CONTENTS

The vision	5
Home is a holy place because God is present there as love	6
Home is a holy place because relationships within the family reflect God's relationship with us	9
Different relationships offer different insights	11
When family life hurts	13
Home is a holy place because God's presence graces all creation	14
The challenge facing us all – and some practical suggestions	16
Telling family stories	16
Searching the scriptures	17
Celebrating the family	18
Sharpening our awareness	18
Background thinking, listening and hoping	21

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

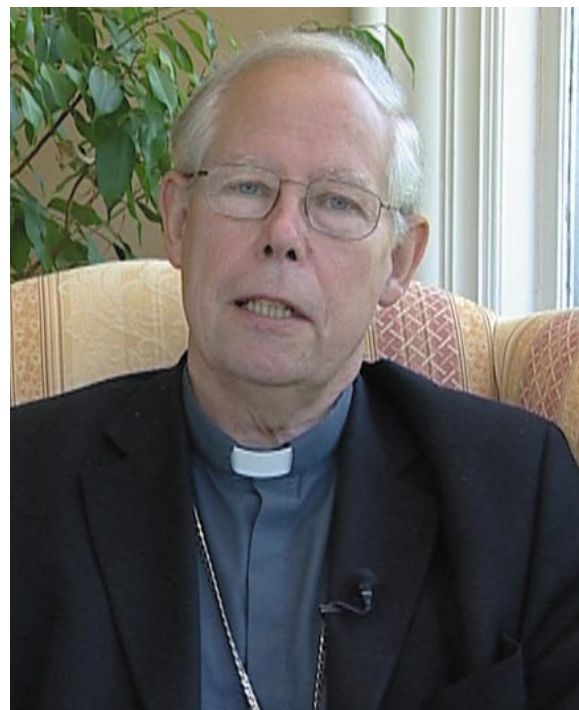
What does home mean to you? What is it like, what was it like, to be in a family: as a child, parent, step-parent, brother or sister, gran or grandad, or some other relation by blood or marriage or adoption. Or just to be a 'good friend of the family'?

And what does life in these families, in your family, say about the God of grace and love? Are families *holy*? Is your home 'a holy place'?

Home is a Holy Place is an initiative of the Catholic bishops of England and Wales. They want to raise greater awareness and understanding among both laity and clergy of the *holiness* of family life. This document describes three ways in which we hope that you can see that your home is holy. It also addresses some of the challenges that face all of us in becoming more aware of family holiness.

The Marriage and Family Life Project Office has worked with parents, married people, family ministers, pastoral leaders and theologians to produce this introduction to *Home is a Holy Place*, an accompanying DVD and group resources. Hopefully you will find the ideas outlined here inspiring, and yet realistic. Insights into marital and family spirituality are rich and illuminating. In sharing them more widely, we leave it to you, couples and families, children and adults, including single people – since you too belong to families – to draw on your own experiences in order to put some flesh on these bare bones.

We hope that you will be supported in this by your local faith communities. And we hope that many of you will get involved. We truly believe that it is important to engage people from all stages and phases of the family life cycle in reflecting on *Home is a Holy Place*, so that together, with God's help, we can all grow in knowledge, appreciation and understanding of the true spiritual riches of family life.



+John Hine

Chair, Bishops' Committee
for Marriage and Family Life

The vision

These days every organisation seems to have a 'vision' or a 'mission statement'. Such language makes most sense, however, when we are thinking about what we desire from God, and what we expect from God's Church. So this is our vision for this project:

Vision Statement

- 1 Home is a holy place because God is present there as love
- 2 Home is a holy place because relationships within the family reflect God's relationship with us
- 3 Home is a holy place because God's presence graces all creation

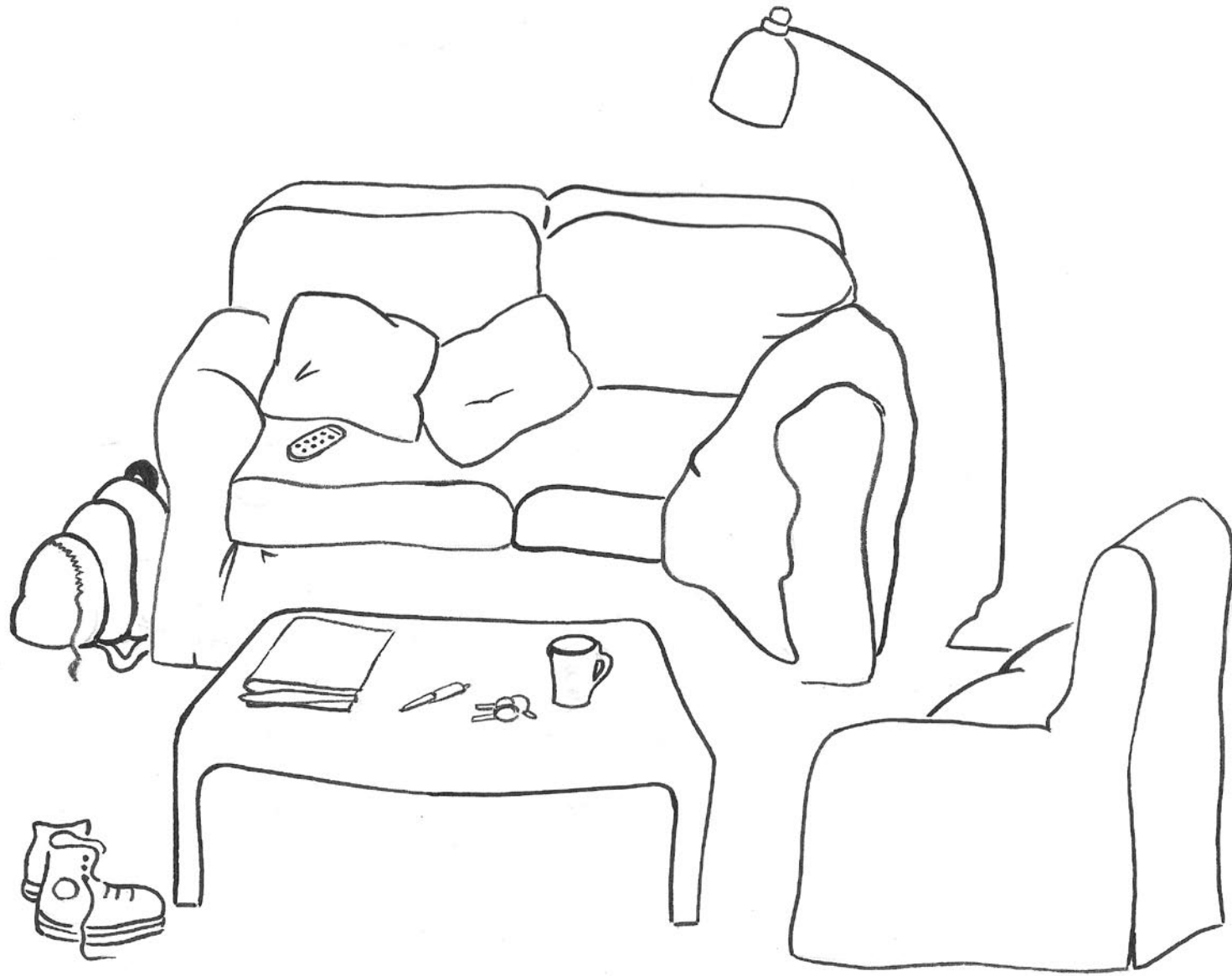
Goals

Home is a Holy Place has three main aims:

- To help families recognise the holiness of their everyday lives at home and to offer practical support for them to grow in this awareness
- To celebrate the presence of God as love in all loving family relationships
- To proclaim the holiness of our homes as places of life, love, service, teaching, fellowship, witness and prayer



HOME IS A HOLY PLACE...



...because God is present there as love

'Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.' 1 JOHN 4:7-8

From our earliest years as Christians we learn that God is love, and that we are to love our God and our neighbours as we love ourselves. We also learn from Jesus' life, death and resurrection what it means to fully love others. This central Christian understanding is the basis of family and marital spirituality. Families are holy because God is love. When true love – real love – is present at home, God is there. And the more real that love becomes in marriage and family life, the clearer it is that God is present.

During *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, when the bishops invited families across England and Wales to talk about their lives at home, in the world and in church, most of the families who responded identified the love they shared together as the greatest blessing of their family life. In the report on *Listening 2004, Not Easy But Full of Meaning*, we read:

'Over and over again, way ahead by far of any other family joy (or difficulty) expressed, we heard of the joy of simply being together, sometimes in times of gathering and celebration, but often in the ordinary daily routines of eating together or watching TV. This discovery is surely something to celebrate.'

Where, and how, was this love felt? The report lists concrete examples identified by families:

'Sharing outings including shopping; closeness, fidelity, trust, sex, prayer.'

'Celebrating family life, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, marriages, achievements and just thanking God for all that he has given us.'

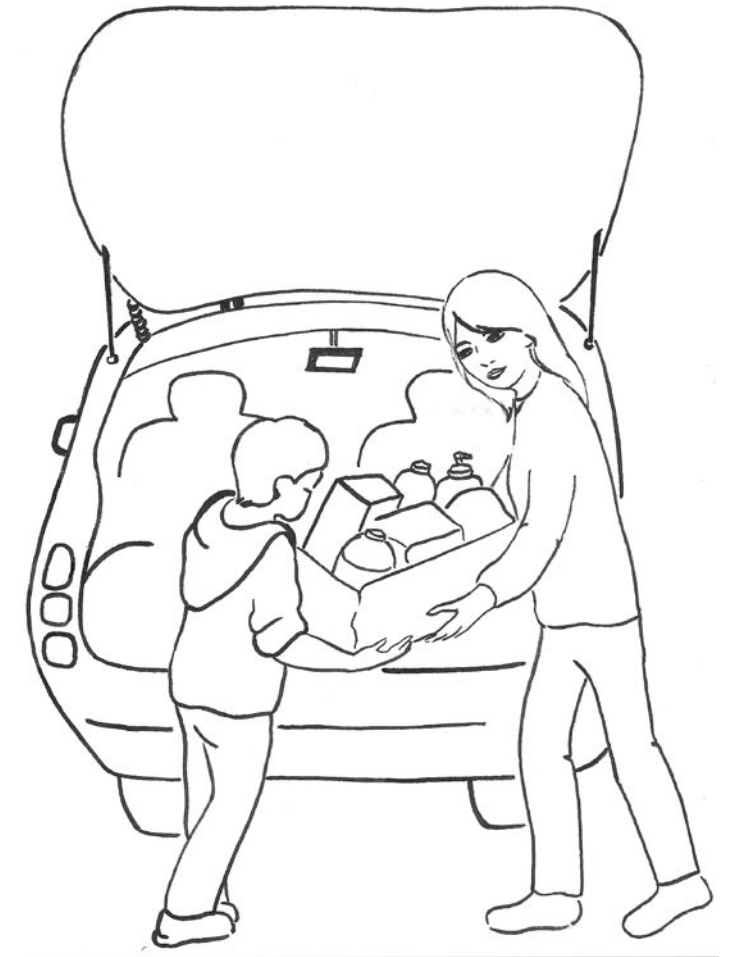
'Trust, love, friendship, marriages and births; working through difficult times, growing stronger as a unit.'

'Incredible love generated between us. Watching children growing up and being together. Seeing the children's generosity and awareness. Enjoying quiet family times, walks and sitting around the fire.'

Those who came to the *Releasing Formidable Energy* symposium, held in October 2006 to prepare for *Home is a Holy Place*, also affirmed the central importance of love within the family. For them, too, love is the basis for knowing God's presence in our homes. They commented:

'God is constant love: families are reservoirs of that love.'

'Within the family, love creates life in all that we do



and are becoming.'

'Home is where we learn to love ourselves, others and God.'

'There is a theology of family which our hearts know already.'

No one is saying that God's love is exclusive to marriage, parenting and family life. But most people would agree that family, parental and marital love is particularly significant because of the way it forms us all, from our earliest moments of life. During *Listening 2004* we heard many comments like this one:

'If my parents were not so incredibly patient, loving and blessed by God, we children would not have had such a wonderful foundation.'

The way that we experience love within our families profoundly affects our own understanding of love, and therefore our understanding of God. It also changes our hearts and lives by building our capacity to be loving and become more loving towards others. The bishops recognised this in 2004 when they wrote their document *Cherishing Life*:
'In order to love another person it is necessary to have that security that comes from having been loved. That



is why the love of parents is so important for a child's personal development and growth... It is from our first carers that we learn how to love ourselves and how to love others in the right way.' (98)

So families participate uniquely in the creative love of God. Family love, like God's love, is life-giving in countless ways. The love of our family nurtures our physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being.

What does the Church teach about family love?

In Catholic teaching the *primary* purpose and power of family life is the love that families generate. Without love, families cannot fulfil the purposes that God intends for them.

'The family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love...' (Familiaris Consortio 17)

'The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons.

The inner principle of that task, its permanent power and its final goal is love: without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons.' (Familiaris Consortio 18)

True love cannot be contained. Like a bucket filled to the brim, family love at its best spills over so that other people are also touched and nourished by it. Therefore as well as being life-giving within the home, true family love reaches out to those beyond the family threshold.

'Among the various works of the family apostolate the following may be listed: adopting abandoned children, showing a loving welcome to strangers, helping with the running of schools, supporting adolescents with advice and help, assisting engaged couples to make better preparation for marriage, taking a share in catechism-teaching, supporting married people and families in a material or moral crisis, and in the care of the aged not only providing them with what is indispensable but also procuring for them a fair share of the fruits of economic progress.' (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity II)

The Church values family love for the sake of the human person, the family unit and for society. But the Church's teaching goes even further than this. It believes that the Church itself depends on families for generating and modelling the kind of love to which the larger family of the Church aspires. Families can help the Church to be a truly human Church.

'Thanks to love within the family, the Church can and ought to take on a more homelike or family dimension, developing a more human and fraternal style of relationships.' (Familiaris Consortio 64)

HOME IS A HOLY PLACE...



...because relationships within the family reflect God's relationship with us

‘We love because God first loved us. If we say we love God, but hate our brothers and sisters, we are liars. For people cannot love God, whom they have not seen, if they do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they have seen. The command that Christ has given us is this: all who love God must love their brothers and sisters.’ | JOHN 4:19-21

Where is love? Life-giving love flourishes particularly in healthy marital, parental and family relationships. Such relationships can be messy, of course; we cannot deny that. But they serve as the ties that bind us together. And that is where our God is to be found: in the heart of family love and in the heart of family connectedness or *communion*.

God’s own ‘mystery of personal loving communion’ (*Familiaris Consortio 11*) is the source of family love and communion. University of Leuven theologian Thomas Knieps-Le Roi, speaking during the *Releasing Formidable Energy* symposium, described how the Holy Trinity is a model for human family love and how human family love reveals something of the life of the Holy Trinity: *‘As the divine persons in the Trinitarian life are united in a communion of love and intimacy, while at the same time reaching out toward creation, family members embrace each other with flexible bonds which allow equally for both an intimately related community and an outward orientation... not only does the Trinity serve as a model for family life, but familial relations also reveal something of the very being of God’s inner life.’*

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out: *‘The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.’ (2205)*

Sometimes the most important things in our lives just can’t be seen with our human eyes. A relationship is often intangible, yet it is a vital ‘something’ that makes two people more than just two people, and three more than just three, and so on. Relationships have a power of their own to create something extra – energy, dynamism, change, for example - as they generate life for and between those involved, and for and between the others who are touched by them.

During *Listening 2004* we heard a lot of people speak about the significance of their relationships both at home and in the church. In *Not Easy But Full*

of *Meaning* we read:

‘It is God who has called us to a Christian marriage, who supports us and helps us to grow as persons in our family life, and who in and through our family relationships draws us into communion with God, Father, Son and Spirit.’

‘Giving and receiving love within a secure family unit was the foundation for the strength to cope with the struggles both within and outside the family.’

‘People said their ‘Hopes from the Church’ are for acceptance, being there, belonging. It is clear that all this means that people, relationships, friendships come first.’

The symposium participants identified the importance of relationships to the flourishing of God’s holy life and love at home:

‘Holiness lies in developing deep relationships.

Developing relationships needs time. We should challenge demands on our time.’

‘We become who we are through encounter.’

‘Married love is the ideal heart of family life. Christ’s redeeming love is in all loving relationships.’

Families can also be thought of as generating a kind of light for others. And light has an effect even at a distance. Could we think of loving relationships as glowing with a life that is – in the words of St John’s Gospel (1:1-9): *‘the light of all people . . . the true light which enlightens everyone?’*

We hope so, for this is the Light of Christ.



‘Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend...’ (*Deus Caritas Est 39*)

But not just any old relationship will do. The *quality* of family relationships is extremely important. As the late Pope John Paul pointed out during the great Jubilee year of 2000:

‘Purely functional relationships are not enough for human beings. They need interpersonal relationships that are rich in inner depth, gratuitousness and self-sacrifice. Fundamental among these are the relationships created in the family: between husband and wife, and between them and their children.’

Again, the Trinity provides a model for our human relationships, inspiring us to reflect equality and mutuality, unity and diversity, autonomy and connectedness in our giving and receiving. In order to support and nourish the spirituality of families and marriages, we must surely do whatever we can to assist ourselves and others in learning and practising the relationship skills that are so necessary to be and to better become the spouses, parents and families that God intends.

Writer Marjorie Thompson points out that we can see our relationships as a spiritual discipline: *‘From the standpoint of faith, the way we relate to one another must be identified as the quintessential spiritual discipline of family and church life. I believe it is our native vocation as Christians to reflect God’s love, forgiveness and challenge to faithful growth in whatever context we find ourselves. There is nothing abstract or easy about expressing consistent respect and care for one another, especially amid the mundane, repetitious routines and daily stresses of life together. That’s what makes family spirituality such a challenge.’*

When we get this right, we open ourselves to the grace that God bestows through relationships. For it is through our relationships, especially our family relationships, that many of us feel a sense of belonging, that we are not only acceptable but lovable too, that is our inheritance as whole people – created, blessed and loved by God. Love is God’s presence in families and relationships. Family love

is love in action, making God’s presence deeply felt: soothing and comforting, holding and healing, releasing and letting go.

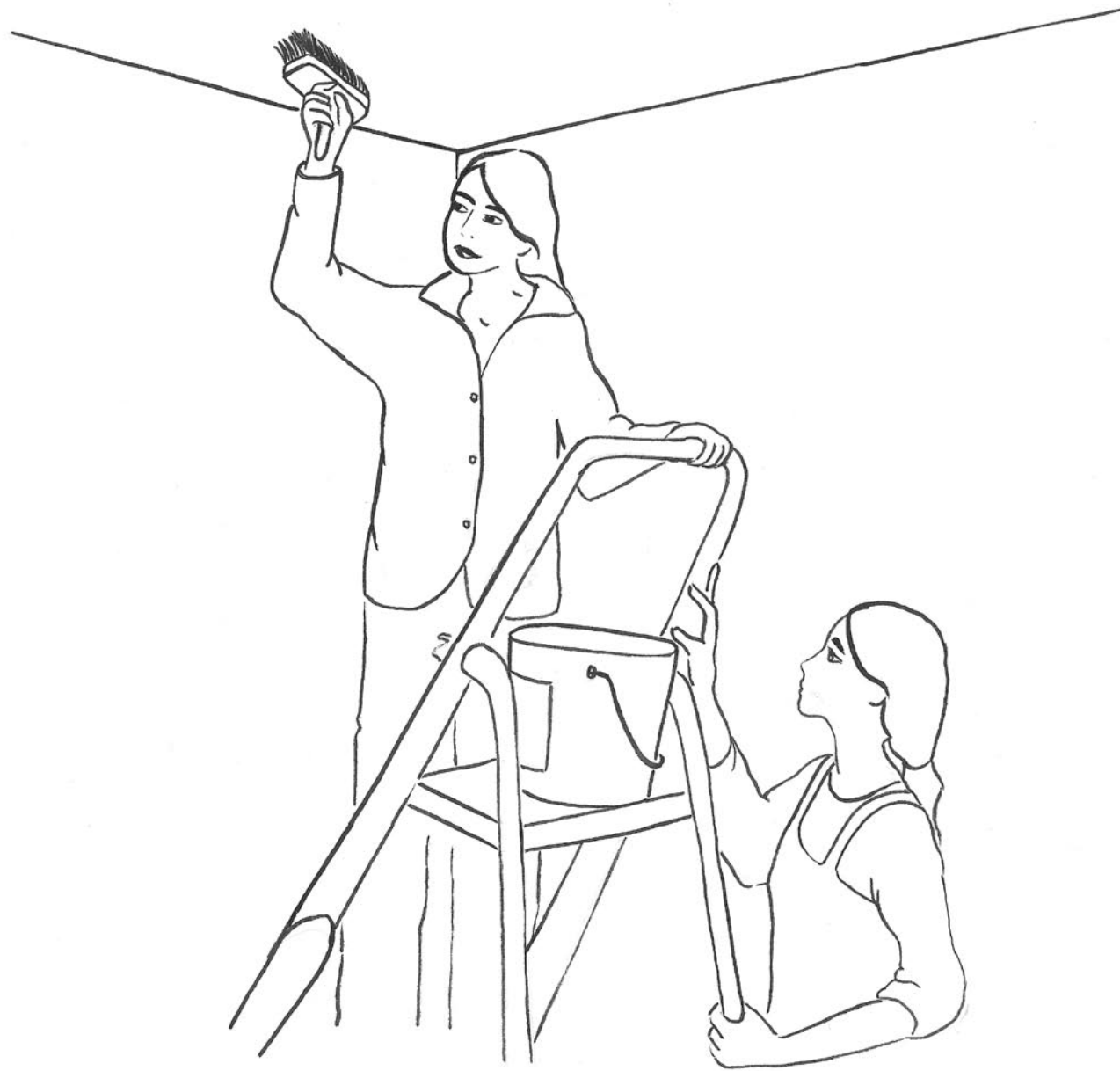
Different relationships offer different insights

Family spirituality and marital spirituality are *relational* spiritualities, in contrast to spiritualities that are more oriented towards individuals. They are about being in the presence of God, and turning our faces towards God in the middle of the crush and chaos (and, yes, sometimes the warfare) of our relationships. They are about finding God in the *heart of life*, at the centre of the relationships that define our homes and our families.

Family relationships are certainly never static and they are frequently rather puzzling. In this, perhaps, they reflect the mystery of the ever-active God. Different human relationships will reflect different aspects of this deeper bond of our relationship with God.

At the human level, the relationship that offers the greatest opportunity for the most complete self-giving in every possible way is that of **marriage**. Many talk of marriage as experiencing a crisis these days, but if such a crisis really exists, perhaps we should view it more as opportunity: a God-given opportunity to discover and describe anew the universal significance of an individual’s lifelong commitment to another, loving and cherishing through all the ups and downs of life. When else does a human relationship involve such complete acceptance of another: physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically and, of course, spiritually? So marriage enjoys a special place of reverence in our understanding of the holiness of the home, and married couples especially are called to be involved in fleshing out the meaning of Home is a Holy Place through the mystery of marriage. *‘In the words of the Council, the “communion” of persons is drawn in a certain sense from the mystery of the Trinitarian “We”, and therefore “conjugal communion” also refers to this mystery. The family, which originates in the love of man and woman, ultimately derives from the mystery of God. This conforms to the innermost being of man and woman, to their innate and authentic dignity as persons.’* (*Letter to Families 8*)

The **parent-child relationship** connects clearly with the creative love of God. It is perhaps the most altruistic, the most self-giving, of all family relationships. Being a parent is not just very hard



work, it is also an unrivalled opportunity for spiritual growth, for it brings with it many insights into what it means to love another steadfastly and ‘gratuitously’ – that is, without seeking any reward. All parents and children do well to reflect on the depth within this relationship; it is a way into learning more about the true nature of true love, which is the surest mark of God’s presence in their relationship.

We also need to reflect far more than we do on the spirituality of **sibling relationships**, for they offer a special example of love that is learned in close relationships. Sibling love often needs to be sustained through many difficulties, particularly in the face of the temptation to envy that seems such a natural part of children growing up together and sharing their parents’ love. Sibling relationships offer us some insights into what it means to be brothers

and sisters in Christ, and sons and daughters of one Heavenly Father who shares his love among us.

In the situation of **extended families** and with **friends**, many single people come and go in the home and are often named as members of the family (‘by adoption and grace’, as it were). They can be an important part of the family support structure in all sorts of ways, not least because they are not too close to us. One of the spiritual values that marks out the home is our sense that the family cannot flourish if it is closed in on itself. Extended family and friends are therefore an important part of the family fabric, strengthening ‘the tent flaps’ that allow an easier coming and going between the home and God’s outside world.

When family life hurts

Family life is one of God’s highest callings. It is also one of the most difficult vocations that we ever embark on. Families are human and therefore vulnerable and fragile.

Throughout *Listening 2004*, while we heard many family accounts of joy, we also heard many stories about this pain. The report, *Not Easy But Full of Meaning*, states:

‘Many families carry what have been called the hidden illnesses, difficult personalities, various forms of mental ill health, behavioural problems, modern manifestations of psychological malaise such as anorexia, and increasingly common - anxiety and low self-esteem. As well as placing great strain on families these are often also a source of shame and give rise to intensely painful feelings of failure and inadequacy. Because of this, many families soldier on alone with intolerable internal pressures, often unknown even to close friends and relatives, because the problems are too painful and too private to bear disclosure.’

This does not mean that there are two kinds of family – one ‘broken’ or hurting, and the other happy or ‘successful’. We have come to realise that each and every family has their own share of both joys and grief, both hopes and anguish.

Throughout the diocesan conversations we also heard of the great love that family members express for one another: a steadfast love that often endures great challenges. So the call to celebrate family must recognise the extent to which *all families*, with, in and through both their blessings and their brokenness, are still places of living love.

But where is God present in those family situations in which love is barely evident? Where is God in family situations of conflict, injustice and dissolution? Sometimes there seems nothing but deep heartbreak, anguish and grief. We asked one of the symposium speakers, Kathleen Chesto, to address this difficult question. Here’s what she said: *‘All of us start off with the hope of being the perfect family. And we make the mistake of believing that this myth of the perfect family, the perfect, Christian family, is a holy family. And then reality sets in. It may be in terms of illness, alcoholism, mental illness, other, more acceptable, illnesses or maybe drugs, a child who’s gay, maybe just children who fight a lot. Maybe our marriage didn’t quite measure up to the “happily ever after” that we had hoped for. And we begin to feel shame and embarrassment, not just in God’s presence but in the presence of our Church. There’s a sense that home can’t be a holy place any more. Not*

because God isn’t there, but because we’re not perfect any more. We’re not what we’re supposed to be. We’ve failed.

How we deal with the crisis; how we deal with the mess; that is the place where we become ‘holy’ family. Any of you who have been there, who have gotten the call that your child has been arrested, who has looked at a daughter who has gotten pregnant outside of marriage, you know that feeling in your stomach. Something has gone terribly wrong. Something will never be the same again in your family.

But the simple fact that nothing will ever be the same again by definition means, this could be the start of something new. In the beginning, the Spirit of God moved over the waters of chaos and out of chaos came creation. It is out of the chaotic that new life comes and, God knows, families are chaotic. But it’s the source of all new life, and what comes first? Light! It’s the light that comes through the cracks when we finally break and let the light in, and let God transform us into the saintly people we are going to become as parents. It is in the cracks that we become holy.’

But even families in crisis are holy. The community of faith can adopt a very positive role in supporting households of faith when things get tough, as they so often do. This may involve offering individuals, couples, parents and whole families a variety of new services: they can be offered opportunities to reflect on, try to heal and to renew key relationships; to learn and practise the skills that are so necessary within these relationships; to seek counselling and advice whenever it is desired, and especially at times of family transition; and above all, perhaps, a listening ear, a welcoming presence, and a healing touch. These services can make a real difference during times of trauma, and can help prevent the break up of families.

Moreover, the community of faith can also support families by listening to them and exploring with them the spirituality of suffering, calamity and loss at home. As St Paul writes: *‘In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ (Romans 8: 37-39)*

HOME IS A HOLY PLACE...

'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.'
ROMANS 1:20

We can say *Home is a Holy Place* because all of God's creation is holy and graced by God's continuing presence. The challenge is one of becoming more present to and more aware of God - in the ordinary, everyday relationships and events of our home life. During *Listening 2004* we noticed that many families identify holiness primarily - even exclusively - with parish or prayer activity. We do well to appreciate that the ordinary life and activity of our homes are also vehicles of God's loving presence and grace.

Our awareness of God's presence throughout creation, God's fingerprints throughout the universe, is often referred to as the sacramental imagination. This is the idea that the created world is used by God as one of the primary ways of conveying to us God's love and insights into God's character. This can be understood in two ways: first, in a general way, through God's presence in all creation; but secondly, and more specifically, through the life of the Church, especially in its explicitly sacramental life. The theme of God's sacramental presence in the family relates to both meanings.

God is to be found at work in all that God has created and now lovingly sustains: in people, communities, movements, events, places, objects, our environment and the world at large - indeed the whole universe. The visible, the tangible, the finite and the historical may all be viewed as actual or potential carriers of the divine presence. It is in and through these concrete realities that we encounter the invisible, Creator God.

The principle of sacramentality is a perspective that can help us all, as couples, families and individuals, to expand our consciousness of God's presence 'at home'. Assisting families to become aware of this spiritual dimension of their everyday life is at the heart of *Home is a Holy Place*. It is about helping one another see the familiar things, and the same old (and young!), loveable (and maddening!) people, *differently*. We do well to see our family as God's family, as the family through which God reveals and expresses God's love. This is a new way of seeing, a re-vision of the family and its relationships. It involves, in a sense, seeing ourselves and others as God's couples, and as God's children,

parents, brothers and sisters. It invites us to see our relationships as God's relationships; to see our homes as God's home; to see our love as God's love.

The Sacraments can be an opportunity for us to appreciate more fully the many connections that already exist, *within* the Church, between our families as the 'domestic Church' (our own 'households of faith') and our local, parish Church (our 'community of faith'). Thus the celebration of **Baptism** is, in principle, deeply connected to *all* our family celebrations of newness, whether they are concerned with new life, a new job or a new home. **Confirmation** finds its mirror in the family chiefly at those times when its members reach one of the many milestone moments of growing maturity. Our family meals are profoundly important for our understanding of **Eucharist**, both our ordinary everyday meals and those extra-special celebratory lunches or dinners - and even breakfasts!

Other sacraments can ring different bells in the family's life. For example, **Reconciliation** is something that begins first in the family, for the home is the first place where confession, reconciliation, and forgiveness need to become real in the natural course of daily life.

And the family's healing activity - whether this is expressed in sticking on plasters, listening to a tale of woe, or caring long-term for the emotional and physical well-being of a family member - should give rise in our hearts and minds to an imaginative connection with the more formal **Sacrament of the Sick**.

Even the sacrament of **Holy Orders** finds a parallel in the family, as parents and carers, who we may think of as the 'ministers of the home', order their households by planning, organising, facilitating and directing those for whom they bear responsibility. Last, but hardly least, **Matrimony**, which the Church regards as the epitome of commitment between a man and a woman - aimed as it is to lifelong fidelity, in a communion of life and love - is mirrored in the family's commitment to deepening relationships among all in the home, and in the family's reaching out in trust and love to others.

...because God's presence
graces all creation





THE CHALLENGE FACING US ALL – AND SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

**‘These things, these things were here
But, the beholder wanting.’
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS**

The question we must now face is this: how can we increase awareness of the holiness of home and release the formidable energy that resides there?

We know that this recognition of a family spirituality can be over-looked or misunderstood as referring to something other than the ordinary life of the home. We know that there is a tendency to connect spirituality exclusively with prayer and holiness with perfection. We know that the word ‘home’ has many different meanings to many different people. We know that family spirituality is as diverse as family experience: every family and every couple have their own spirituality. For this

reason, the sharing of experience is crucial to the work of *Home is a Holy Place*.

As the symposium participants pointed out:
‘The wisdom of lived family experience is basic to the on-going discussion.’

‘The power of the personal witness illuminates the lived Gospel.’

‘We lack a vocabulary for naming graces in families: the tragedy is that they are there.’

‘Broken families are where we dig for treasure. Brokenness is a common experience which needs to be shared. Blessed, broken and shared.’

Telling Family Stories

The sharing of family experience, particularly through ordinary family stories, can build up both spirituality and community, as we discovered in *Listening 2004*. In *Not Easy But Full of Meaning* we read:

‘Sharing stories of family life and talking openly about

them had an encouraging effect on those who took part. Participants expressed in a variety of ways a sense of no longer being alone or of feeling more normal.’

Of course, this is not just telling stories for the sake of it, rambling on pointlessly. With talk like that it doesn’t matter whether people are really listening, or whether they really care what it is that people are ‘on about’. But these family stories have a point: these stories are about something that matters. They therefore need to be told and heard, listened to and understood.

In listening to others we need to discern what people are really expressing: what is at ‘the heart of the matter’. During the symposium, the following process of discernment was described by theologian David Thomas as he related it to those present:
‘The great spiritual teachers talk about three levels of seeing reality:

- *The first level is the physical level. It’s what we see on the surface. I look out here and I see a lot of people, most of whom, as far as I can tell, are still awake. I can see that. I see interest; I see quizzical looks on the part of some. I see a lot of different expressions. That I can see with my physical eyes, as they would say in the spiritual literature.*
- *But, if I want to know more and not just sense more, I have to find out more about you. So that’s when the mental or intellectual level comes in. And I learn about you, I learn where you’re from, we’ve been doing that. You are people from different parts of the world,*



different dioceses, different organisations, and different perspectives on a lot of things. You are not just a group of abstract strangers or men and women, but people with ideas, people with thoughts, people with lives. So I learn more, as I move from the eyes of the body to the eyes of the mind.

- *But there’s one more step to take and that is what the spiritual writers and the theologians describe as “seeing with the eyes of the spirit”. And these, my friends, are the eyes that Jesus saw with all the time. He saw everyone as related to God. Jesus would look at people and he would see a straight line going right back to the creative love of God. That each person is created by God, unique, wonderful, wonderfully made, beautiful, worthwhile, of value, so on and so on. It’s not the first thing we think about. But it can come to us. It comes when we see a person, not just on the surface but we see them in their connection with God, which is ongoing, constant and necessary; none of us could breathe a breath without God’s creative power.’*

Searching the Scriptures

The treasure trove of the Bible is an enormous resource for raising awareness of marital and family spirituality, especially because of the importance of gospel values to many families, as we heard so often during *Listening 2004*:

‘The unchanging nature of gospel values was often identified as providing families with stability and strength. Families often coped with stress by practising gospel values of mercy, tolerance, hospitality etc.’

‘Tolerance, love, respect, compromise.’

‘By supporting each other and pulling together. Keeping a happy environment at home with lots of love.’

‘By admitting mistakes, loving, giving, being non-judgmental.’ (Not Easy But Full of Meaning 81)



The account in St Matthew's gospel of the Last Judgement (25:31-46) shows how gospel values are embodied when parents feed their hungry and thirsty children – and sometimes their friends! There are many more passages that deserve just as much prayerful reflection. We invite families, groups and parish communities to seek out those texts that they find especially helpful in seeing God's presence in their own family experience.

Celebrating the Family

Celebration is fundamental to the very idea of *Home is a Holy Place*, as it springs from the great joy of knowing that God's home is with us wherever and whoever we are. The report of the *Listening 2004* project, *Not Easy But Full of Meaning*, contains many stories that are good news both for families and for the Church. Participants in that process requested that more attention and energy should be focused on celebrating this good news. Read the words of one bishop who participated in this process:

'Today I suggest that we take as a motto "Celebrating it as it is." By that I am suggesting that we recognise the messiness that is the human condition and that is at the heart of living and that we celebrate marriage and family life as it is, for good and for less good. That involves an attitude towards failure and messiness which is compassionate and forgiving and supportive.'

The *Home is a Holy Place* Working Group would like to invite families, groups and communities to produce their own resources and activities that affirm the blessedness, but also recognise the brokenness, in our marriage and family life. We clearly need both parish and home-centred rituals and celebrations that can do these things. For celebration is an essential aspect of our recognising and affirming God in the life-giving, loving, healthy relationships of married, parental and family life; and also in the times and seasons of family pain and broken relationships.

Examples of these sorts of celebrations might include:

- Liturgical celebrations, such as special Masses and non-Eucharistic services for National Marriage Week, Baptisms, Funerals, Weddings, Renewal of Marriage Vows and Family Fast Meals.
- Rituals, such as blessings of children, meal time graces, family prayers, Shrove Tuesday pancakes, Advent calendars, Lenten fasts and house blessings.
- Family traditions, such as birthdays, anniversaries, coming of age celebrations, first day at school, holidays, feast days, Sunday dinner, and perhaps even for passing a driving test!

Many of these can and should include a wider social element, to help build relationships between families and individuals within the faith community.

Sharpening our Awareness

In the Christian tradition formation has consistently been offered to help people to see better, as Jesus' miracles restored sight to the blind. In offering this vision of *Home is a Holy Place*, the Working Group earnestly hope that an increased awareness of these key themes in the spirituality of the home will help families and the wider community see better God's presence at home, and increase efforts in the wider church to this same end. In faith and hope, we anticipate that 'the release of formidable energy', so apparent during *Listening 2004* and the symposium in October 2006, will continue. For *'the family possesses and continues still to release formidable energies...'* (*Familiaris Consortio* 43)

Symposium participants identified a number of practical activities as being necessary for the successful implementation of the ideas and ideals of *Home is a Holy Place*. They were many and varied, and included these seven suggestions:

- 1 Affirm the life of the family as holy, good and



- important in the eyes of God through meetings for adults at key sacramental moments, parenting courses, parish missions for marriage and family life.
- 2 Deepen awareness of the holiness of domestic life by publicising and encouraging a range of domestic rituals and blessings.
- 3 Awaken families to the holiness that is present in family life and in personal relationships using existing small groups within the parish community (baptism/marriage preparation, confirmation, etc.) to explore how God works in their lives.
- 4 Review materials currently used. Get diocesan marriage and family life agencies and catechists to work together.
- 5 Enable everyone to be aware of the holiness of their vocation. Re-affirm the parents' vocation of educating their children. Engage parents in the preparation of their children for the sacraments and enable them to do it.
- 6 Identify and develop strategies for delivering pre-marriage preparation, parenting skills, faith development and spirituality so as to enable family life to be understood as the main road to

holiness for most people.

- 7 Help married couples to reflect on their lived experiences of married life and to discern the spirituality within them.

So we now wish to promote a collaborative approach, by inviting all those who possess a genuine concern for and love of families to join with us in working towards the three goals of *Home is a Holy Place*:

- to help families recognise the holiness of their everyday lives at home and to offer practical support for them to grow in this awareness;
- to celebrate the presence of God as love in all loving family relationships, and
- to proclaim the holiness of our homes as places of life, love, service, teaching, fellowship, witness and prayer.

Where possible, we have highlighted and made available a number of resources that people have found to be helpful, through the project website:

www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk



of challenges and difficulties). And eventually to see God in resurrection, when new life and hope is revealed through and in our family's celebrations and successes.

As dioceses and parishes share materials developed locally, this collection will grow.

We now want to encourage everyone who reads this document to seek to see God's presence in their own homes, and to make God's presence there more widely known, served and celebrated.

We conclude with these inspiring words from the late Pope John Paul II, who wrote more about the family than any other pope. In *Familiaris Consortio*, we read:

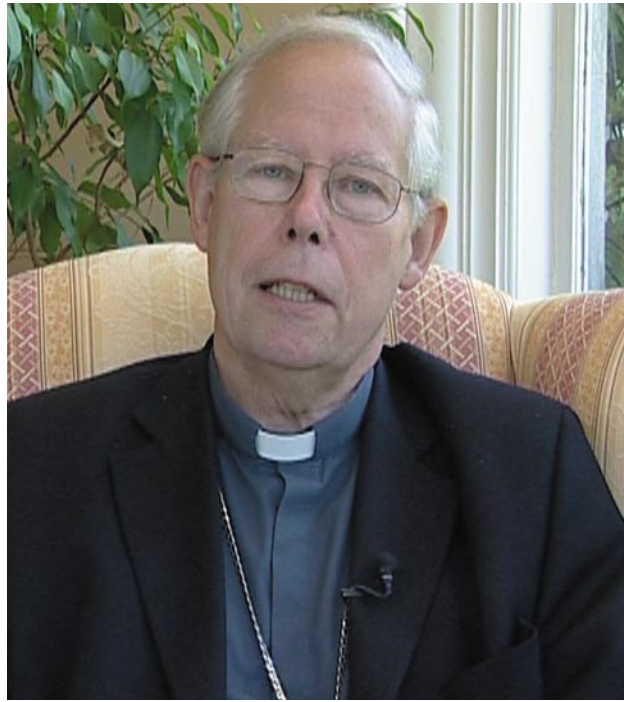
'Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to sanctity. For them this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life. This gives rise to the grace and requirement of an authentic and profound conjugal and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection, and sign...' (*Familiaris Consortio* 56)

Let us pray that God's Spirit will open our eyes to the glory of God's real presence at home: in creation (including the daily struggle for survival), covenant (within our many and varied family relationships) and cross (the real pain and suffering



Background Listening





BACKGROUND THINKING, LISTENING AND HOPING

The Bishops identified *Home is a Holy Place* as a priority following their year of listening to families' experiences at home, in the world and in the church in 2004. Whilst families clearly drew on their faith in God to sustain their daily lives, there was little evidence that families knew about or were affirmed by the church in the spirituality of the home. During diocesan Family Listening Days, conversations around domestic spirituality tended to focus on prayer life and parish-centred activity. Yet God's presence at home can be seen in countless other ways: in the everyday acts of service and of struggle, and in the communication and communion of the home. These are all ways that can and do strengthen families, bringing them closer together, lightening their burdens, and renewing couples, parents, siblings and whole families in their vocation to life-giving love. As the report on *Listening 2004, Not Easy But Full of Meaning*, states:

'A broader understanding of marital and family spirituality among both clergy and laity will be fundamental to the success of any future work by the church in support of family life.'

Home is a Holy Place is the second phase of *Celebrating Family: Blessed, Broken, Living Love*, in which the reality of family life expressed during *Listening 2004* is acknowledged as deeply blessed,

often broken but, nevertheless, living love.

Throughout this document the project Working Group has drawn on family experience to illustrate the text. Quotations are from two main sources:

- Responses by families made during *Listening 2004: My Family My Church* project, as reported in *Not Easy But Full of Meaning: Catholic Family Life in 2004*, Redemptorist Publications, 2005.
- Comments from participants at the *Releasing Formidable Energy Symposium* in October 2006. This symposium was designed to be a resource for the work of *Home is a Holy Place*, exploring responses to *Listening 2004*, theological principles of marital and family spirituality, family spirituality in challenging circumstances, and similarities and differences between marital and family spirituality. The keynote presentations by Dr David M. Thomas, Dr Kathleen Chesto and Dr Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi have been especially appreciated by the Working Group.

This document has been prepared by the *Home is a Holy Place* Working Group in order to:

- clarify fundamental principles of marital and family spirituality; and
- guide people in homes, parishes, dioceses and church organisations in raising awareness, increasing understanding and practically supporting families to realise, live and celebrate their call to holiness.

The Working Group also hopes that this document will:

- facilitate a deeper and wider reflection on the meaning of spirituality as lived in the domestic church, which is the church of the home;
- enable a review of existing Church practice in the light of these fundamental principles; and
- lead to the incorporation of these principles within current schemes of work.

Areas of Church ministry that should especially be encouraged to share this vision are catechetical teams, pastoral leaders, teachers, marriage preparation providers, adult formation teams, seminarians and ordained ministers.



Ever loving God,
we, your children,
always grateful for your gift of family,
thank you for the holiness of our homes.

Graced by your abiding presence,
may we appreciate your gifts,
experience your joy,
endure our messiness and
remain hopeful during difficulties.

May all of us,
whoever we are,
never forget that you
are at the heart
of all the love we share.
Amen.



Home is a Holy Place is an initiative of the
Catholic Bishops of England and Wales
www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk