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Families: a broad canvas

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There are regular descriptions in the literature of the ideal Catholic marriage and family. Few bear any resemblance to the reality. There is no abstract state of marriage that somehow is the epitome of excellence, a Platonic Form of marriage as it were. There is just marriage between two people who bring to the relationship all their psychological strengths and weaknesses, their immaturity and unrealistic expectations, and their hopes for the future. Just as no two people are the same, no two marriages are the same. Some marriages remain in a comfortable co-dependency without any growth, some grow and flourish, others fall apart. Some become seriously out of kilter when one person in the relationship grows and the other doesn't. Some are utterly toxic environments for the couple involved and the children that are born into them. Many limp along doing the best they can. All this is as true of Catholic marriages and families as it is of non-sacramental marriages. There urgently needs to be a demythologising of Catholic marriage and family life. It's as messy, difficult and painful as any other. It can also be a place of flourishing, growth, hope and joy, just like any other but always tempered by the unavoidable vicissitudes of life. That's the reality.

THE LINEAGE OF JESUS

A good place to start with the less than perfect view of families is the genealogy of Jesus. The function of genealogy in early Israelite society was important – it listed actual kinship ties, but it could also be used metaphorically for political and social alignments, with lists of kings, priests or office-holders. Genealogies could be simply linear or branched, which showed both vertical and horizontal relationships. Branched genealogies were used for multiple purposes and, as such, could contain quite a degree of variation as a society's religious, political and economic configurations could,

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and did, differ significantly. Linear genealogies, on the other hand, were for one purpose only: to locate a claim to power or status or to office. Both genealogies of Jesus in the gospels are linear, and though they contain significant differences, their purpose is achieved, that of linking Jesus to the promise of God for humankind.

Matthew's genealogy is interesting in that it includes four women who do not fit the picture one might expect for tracing the lineage of Jesus, the Son of God. They are Tamar (Gen 38) Rahab (Josh 2, 6:22-27), Ruth (Ruth) and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11, 12). Luke's genealogy omits all women.

TAMAR

Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah. Her husband, Er, was killed by God for his wickedness. When her brother-in-law, Onan refused his father's order to perform his levirate duty to his brother and have sexual relations with Tamar, he too was killed by God. Judah did not want to risk the death of his third and last son, Shelah, so told Tamar to go live with her father's people as a widow until Shelah grew up. Judah never sent Shelah to Tamar and when he eventually was widowed himself, Tamar, disguising herself as a prostitute had sex with Judah. She conceived and bore twin boys, and upon presenting the evidence Judah had given her as a pledge for future payment for her services, he accepted paternity of Tamar's twin sons, Perez and Zerah. Apart from Tamar's strategic deceit to become pregnant by Judah, it is worth noting that the twins were born of what would have been a forbidden degree of relationship in the Law – father-in-law/daughter-in-law. Even in the matter of primogeniture, we have another challenge to the right order of things. The first twin to be born, and whose protruding hand had already been marked with a red thread, was usurped by the second twin, Perez who arrived first.

RAHAB

Rahab, unlike Tamar, was a bona-fide prostitute and when the Israelites came to spy on Jericho in advance of the famous attack, she hid them from the authorities. She then saw them safely away and for her actions she and all her family were spared when Jericho was destroyed. The major point being made was Rahab's acceptance of the power of the One God, even though she was a foreigner. As the wife of Salmon, the great-grandson of Perez (above) Rahab becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus.

RUTH

The story of Ruth is well-known from the biblical book of the same name. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, her husband and two sons

fled famine in Israel and were economic migrants in the country of Moab. Naomi's sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. Following the death of her husband and then of her two sons, Naomi instructed her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth to return to their families. Following some resistance, Orpah eventually acquiesces to Naomi's request. Ruth refuses point-blank to obey her mother-in-law and insists on staying with her. Through her care of her mother-in-law Ruth finds favour with Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi, and eventually Boaz and Ruth marry. So even though Ruth was a foreigner, her faithfulness and loyalty were rewarded. She and Boaz produce a son, Obed who was the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David.

BATHSHEBA

David covets Bathsheba, a married woman, when, from the roof of his house, he sees her bathing. He has intercourse with her and as a result she becomes pregnant. Her husband, Uriah, was one of David's faithful and loyal military officers. David attempts to manipulate Uriah to go see his wife (and one presumes have sex) so that the child Bathsheba was carrying would be believed to be his. However, Uriah refuses to go – his men are camping in the fields and he sees no reason why he should be privileged to go home to his wife for food, drink and intimacy. Frustrated by Uriah's uprightness and loyalty, David then arranges that Uriah will be placed in the front line of one of the current battles where the fiercest fighting is taking place. Uriah is killed and David marries his widow, Bathsheba. The child conceived in adultery dies, but eventually Solomon is born to David and Bathsheba, and so the line of succession continues.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The most obvious lesson is that God "writes straight with crooked lines." All kinds of family configurations have purpose. All have their place. It might not be immediately obvious that this is so. But surely after two millennia of Christianity on a foundation of several millennia of Judaism, we should be able to learn that what at first seems scandalous may not, in truth, be so. If this is so in the human family history of Jesus, where it was very important to his evangelisers to present as positive picture as possible of the man they came to recognise as Son of God, then it is also possible for us.

The second lesson is that the rules, though they have a place in maintaining order, need not always be applied without exception. Rules serve the purpose of life; life's purpose is not the maintenance of rules. Jesus' own life and ministry is a constant witness to that.

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The third lesson is that we cannot know the mind of God with certainty. Ascertaining the will of God is an ongoing process that is constantly undermined by human fear, desire for power and need to control - what the theologian Charles Davis called “the lust for certainty.” It is only by the outcomes will we know that we are on the right path – do we sow seeds of acceptance, affirmation, inclusion or do we spread the weeds of rejection, conditional acceptance, condemnation and exclusion. Do people flourish because of us or do they become broken, disillusioned or alienated?

NEW CONFIGURATIONS OF FAMILY

The same-sex family is a new configuration of family. We, in Church, can condemn it or allow ourselves be challenged by it and learn from it. It seems to break all the rules, but so did the families of several ancestors in the lineage of Jesus. Issues around purity of race were very important to the Israelites in their self-understanding as God’s chosen ones. Issues around degrees of prohibited marriage were also very important. Issues around adultery and murder were also important – yet all of these transgressions are part of Jesus’ heritage, by Scripture’s own understanding of him.

We cannot know what same-sex families mean for us as God’s pilgrim people unless and until we engage with them. Condemning them out of hand is not an acceptable response. A perfect opportunity would have been the upcoming World Meeting of Families (WMOF) in Dublin in August this year. Initially, there appeared to be hope that this would be so. The handbook for parishes issued on the www.amoris.ie website to prepare for the WMOF had several images of same-sex couples – nothing outré, just very ordinary everyday photos. And, significantly, in a video presentation on what family means to people, the Irish-born auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, David O’Connell, quoting Pope Francis, spoke about non-standard family configurations, including same-sex couples. This created quite a positive feeling about the purpose and possible impact of the WMOF in fostering inclusion. This seemed especially fitting given that Ireland was the first country in the world to approve same-sex marriage by the will of the people.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

Our Church seems to be especially adept at snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. The major schisms within Christianity attest to this. But also the less dramatic but no less damaging, internal matters: the repudiation of modernism in the early 20th century, the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the attempts to roll back the reforms of Vatican II over the past 30 years and losing the spirit

of liberation theology. The lost opportunities have also happened at diocesan and parish level. I regularly hear from friends of the arrival of a new priest who dismantles progress made over many decades in parish participation.

Those involved in organising the WMoF 2018 have managed to lose yet another valuable opportunity for learning. The few photographs indicating same-sex couples were removed from the handbook and replaced by other more bland photos. The portion of the video featuring Bishop David O'Connell's comments on affirming different configurations of families, including same-sex couples was also deleted. No explanation was given as to why this was necessary, nor by whose order it was done.

Obliterating that which we do not want to see does not make it go away. Indeed, we might call it vincible ignorance. When challenged on this, some involved with WMoF have pointed out that a young lesbian woman speaks about coming out to her parents and their acceptance of her. This misses the point – that particular clip is about being an accepted LGBTI member of a heterosexual family. The issue under discussion is same-sex headed families, with children, or without. The Church has much to learn from, and challenges to make to, Catholic same-sex married couples. But any challenges can only be *after* learning has taken place.

There is much in the Church tradition about the family being the primary locus of the education of children, especially in the faith. The Church itself is a universal family in which education of all the baptised should be taking place all the time. The WMoF in Dublin presents the ideal opportunity for the Church at large to learn from same-sex headed families. Only same-sex couples can teach the rest of us about same-sex marriage. We need to listen to them, not as an aberration, but as part of the variety of what it is to be human. They are exercising their role, as baptised Christians, to help us 'decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men [sic] of our age' (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.11).