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Finding Your Place: Family, Story and Identity

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One of the great tasks in life is that of finding your place: finding where you belong, what is enriching for you, what is meaningful; finding the right person, the right employment, the right vocation, the right sport, the right pastime; and so on. This task of finding your place is not an easy one; and in many ways, it is becoming even more difficult with so many possibilities available to us in our culture. Given that there is now so much to do and to experience, we can remain on the surface of life for decades. It is possible to go through all of life and never know what it is to lead a life that is meaningful, to love another person, to find work that is fulfilling, and to know that God loves you. The story of each of our lives is largely *the story of finding our place*.

In terms of finding our place, we do so through a network of groups that are important to us. These may include our workplace, our friends, a school community, a social outlet, a sporting activity, a religious group, or a parish community. But by far the most important group, away ahead of all these others, is *family*: it is where we begin, the first place that shapes us for the journey of life; it is where we are nourished most often throughout life; and it is where we ultimately realise our definitive belonging. I'd like to reflect somewhat on this connection between your *identity* and *family* in the light of the gospel. And, of course, what I have to say is only partial and needs to be complemented by discussion of other dimensions to family and family life.¹

FAMILY THROUGH TIME

The first thing that we need to be aware of is that there is no such thing as a standard or normal family. Objectively as it were, it is not possible to say what is a family: and, indeed, how family is

¹ Material from this article was delivered at The National Novena to Our Lady of Knock, Knock Shrine, Co. Mayo, 19 August 2018; and at the Annual Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Holycross Abbey, Co. Tipperary, 8 September 2018.

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understood changes over time. For the Roman world in the time of Jesus, for example, the *familia* (family) meant ‘the household servants or slaves’ – in fact the word ‘family’ comes from the Latin word for servant or slave (*famulus*). You’ll be surprised, perhaps, to know that there is a long tradition of slavery and servitude in family life! I would hope that we have left that behind us – although some might well argue that it is not completely gone, yet! And just to give you another instance of the changing understanding of family in our European culture: by the end of the nineteenth century, this is how family came to be understood (and I’m quoting from the period): ‘family is a household composed of a head and his domestics, be they women, children, or servants.’² That is an interesting one in terms of the place of women in the understanding of family; domestics! (They were our great-grandmothers). As regards family life, *expectations*, too, change in time. In a first century Jewish family, for example, if a man died leaving a wife and children (and this is mentioned in the gospels), his brother was obliged to marry his widow. This expectation is simply unthinkable, on so many levels, in our present culture.

Family is a cultural and social reality long before it is a religious or faith reality. It is extremely flexible and has changed and continues to change as society and culture changes. In many ways, it is the ambient culture that decides what shape family takes at any particular moment in history and not the Church or religion. In our contemporary setting, families come in all kinds of shapes, and sizes, and colours.

It is very important to acknowledge this diversity when you begin to reflect on family – as sometimes when we speak of family we assume a particular model, or type, or ideal. Spontaneously, we assume that our own family experience is normative; but that is not the case. Acknowledging the diversity is important for at least two reasons. First, it means that each person with his or her family experience – whatever shape it might take – is welcome to the Christian family space; there is no ground on which we might differentiate and exclude anyone or any type of family. Secondly, we cannot know what new forms of family will emerge in the future, and they, too, are welcome to the Christian space. There is no one form of family that has a monopoly on God. Christian faith has blossomed and will continue to blossom in the myriad of family types. And, of course, the good news of the gospel is destined for all families.

Against this general background, I’d like now to reflect very briefly on some family dynamics with one eye on our contemporary situation and the other on the gospel.

2 Dictionnaire universel, 1866-76, Antoine Furetière, s.v. famille.

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OUR FIRST BELONGING

At its best, family is a place of belonging, where you know that you are supported, enabled, and encouraged on your own path in life. That is what it is to be loved. And this holds equally for the children and the adults that make up a family. In terms of the story of your identity, there are two (or, perhaps, three) significant stages in the journey of being part of a family. And they are extremely important in terms of the search for your identity, the quality of your life, and the journey of your faith.

The first stage is family as your place of origin: it is the first landscape that you will walk through; the first language that you will hear and speak; the first disappointment that you will encounter; the first fear that will frighten you; the first love that will nurture you; and the first God that will reach out to you. Your first family is your first belonging. It may be very happy, or it may be very ordinary, or it may be very difficult, or it may be tragic, or it may even be a place that, for the moment, you have wrapped in silence for safety. *The significant thing is that we have no say in our first belonging.* Literally, you find yourself there. It is a given: to be lived, to be enjoyed, to be accepted, to be endured, to be suffered, and, ideally, to be loved. You do not choose your first family. It is the place, where you step into our world; it's the place that God in his great mystery has, somehow, chosen for you, to begin the journey of discovering who you are, of finding your freedom, of learning to love, and, most usually, of hearing about God. It is here that your first words are spoken; that your first steps are taken; that your first ideas³about your self, about our world, and about your God⁴are conceived and communicated. No one can take that first place that is marked out for you.

THE PRIMORDIAL LEAVE-TAKING

In terms of your identity the next crucial insight is that *you must leave this first place of belonging.* It is only a beginning; it is not forever. No matter how good, how effective, how loving, how supportive, how damaging, how terrifying, that this first place has been, it is no more than a place of transition. You must leave and begin again. This leave-taking of your first family is a matter of becoming an adult and owning your own life and finding your own faith. And this step has to be taken by all of us, equally. So no matter where you began in terms of your family-of-origin, you must now take this new step. On this one, we are all together, we are equal: *we must all begin again.* It is only at this junction that our unique adult identity can begin to emerge. That is why it is so important, and so crucial. In a way, we are 'being born again' to use an expression from John's gospel (John 3: 1-9). Indeed, the

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well-known American sociologist of religion, Robert N. Bellah says: ‘Leaving home in a sense involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves.’³ This is not just a nice pious idea: it is the very fabric of your identity, the story of who you are, and who you will become. In our culture, in general, this step, this necessary leave-taking, is frequently delayed, and is becoming more difficult because it is not actively encouraged and supported. The consequences are critical for one’s personal journey and for one’s identity.

This vital step, I believe, helps to explain why Jesus is particularly negative when he speaks about family. Over and over again he underlines how important it is for those who wish to become his disciples to separate out from this first family. In the gospel of Luke, for example, he says: ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14.26); and later in that same gospel he says: ‘From now on five in one household will be divided ... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother’ (Luke 12: 51-53), and so on; and there are a myriad of such texts (see, for example, Matthew 10:37; Mark 13:12, Mark 3:35; Mark 10: 29-30).⁴ These are all very harsh words to hear and read. As prophetic speech, his language is, to some degree, exaggerated, but the point is clear: there is need for separation, for leave-taking, for distance, if we are to follow him.⁵

These sayings from Jesus are not, I believe, a rejection of the value of family and family life; they have their place; but, rather, the recognition that there is a bigger picture, one in which we respond to the call of adult life and faith. To be a person of faith in this world is to be independent, free, and responsible. This is a very important step in terms of healthy human dynamics: and not just for young adults, but also for parents, who have completed their familial task, and who need to move on to other things in the journey of life. *It means that all families-of-origin need, to some*

3 Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (London: Univ. of California Press, 1996), p. 65.

4 There is a certain lack of integrity about any public discourse on the family from a Christian perspective that does not at the very least acknowledge that Jesus has little positive to say about family ties (in the biblical texts). We should, however, equally, bear in mind that the biblical texts themselves are reported narratives and not, strictly speaking, *ipsissima verba*.

5 This may even go some way towards understanding the early monastic tradition of leave-taking or voluntary exile, the *ξενιτεία*. In the Latin West it would emerge as the distinctive tradition (that was especially common across Britain and Ireland) of the *peregrinatio pro Christo*, leaving one’s homeland for the sake of Christ. The trope of leaving home in response to God’s calling goes back, no doubt, to Abraham (see, for example, Hebrews 11:8, and Genesis 12:1).

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degree, to be dissolved. It is, of course, a momentous step that takes time, but it is always outstanding: we are always to some degree in the process of leaving our first family if we wish to respond to the full challenge of life and love and faith. And this leave-taking is not just physical; a bit like the famous Hotel California, you could, in principle, move out and still never leave! Even more importantly, this leave-taking is emotional, psychological, and, evidently, religious.⁶ Not to leave in this comprehensive sense, and to stay in that world of our first belonging is to renege on the task of becoming an adult person, who seeks and finds his or her unique identity.⁷

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In leaving our first family, our various paths diverge in their respective directions, and all the major challenges of life open up for us. And this brings me to the second family. The most significant challenge that many of us will face is that of founding a new family, a second family. It seems to me that, when it comes to this task, we are now in a whole new situation in our culture. We can no longer simply repeat the dynamics of the past.

It is remarkable that in the last twenty years or so, family structure, form, and life have been radically modified. As a culture, we're now leaving behind us a world, where principles such as obedience, respect for authority, speaking only when spoken to, and being silent were considered to be vital. And we are putting in its place a new way of relating that is based on equality, on each person having a voice, on conversation, discussion, respect for difference, mutual agreement, and so on. This is having an enormous impact on family life: in the expectations that couples and partners have of each other; in how parents relate to children; in how adolescents relate to their parents and their grandparents; and so on. And all of this, I believe, is for the better. In fact, I think that what is now emerging in our time – and for the first time in human history – is a vision of family life that reflects in a profound way gospel and kingdom values. Sometimes, it is, of course, hard to understand the change that is taking place (especially for older members of a family); the transformation is so significant and happening now so quickly, that it can be quite disorientating; but, once, you realize that the time has come 'to let go' of a world and its dynamics, and you yourself begin to experience and live a new way of doing things, then I am sure that you would not wish to go

6 It's interesting that in the Buddhist tradition, for example, that first step of leaving home for young monks is called *pabbajja*, the 'departure' or 'going forth' (and generally involves a preliminary ordination as a novice).

7 For a discussion of this leave-taking from the perspective of psychology, see Tony Humphries, *The Family: Love it and Leave it* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994).

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back. This transformation in family life gives everyone a voice, it respects each person, and it is putting an end to structures that were based on power-over others (particularly women and children). We still have a good way to go in our Church life in terms of realizing these same dynamics; but the journey is underway for those who can see it.

There are now all kinds of new dynamics, new expectations, new roles, new responsibilities, and new ways of *being family*.⁸ These are being put in place, negotiated, learned, and lived out in order to flourish as family in our culture. This is not an easy process or achievement, precisely because we are not replicating the past (and many young families easily run into trouble through no great fault of their own). In this task of the ‘second family,’ it is, I believe, vital to reflect on these new dynamics, share experiences with others, and seek support when needed.

I think it might surprise you to learn that to some degree the origin of the change in family dynamics goes back to Jesus. He is the significant voice in a long chain of voices that challenged the time-honoured, patriarchal structure. He treated women differently than was demanded by his surrounding culture; he related to children differently; and he spoke about servants differently.⁹ So, you could say that there is something of the Gospel good news around family-life that is coming to full light only now in families of our time.¹⁰ There is something extraordinary about that!

A NEW COMPLEMENTARITY

At the heart of the contemporary family there is a deep complementarity: each person is always being renewed and the future is always being created, whether we see and acknowledge this or not. It is the place, where life is passed on in every sense: life-skills, hope, energy, values, aspirations, what it is to lead a meaningful life, and, of course, faith. This is not a one-way process that runs along hierarchical lines from old to young or from powerful to weak. Pope Francis is particularly mindful of this dynamic, and, in his message for World Mission Day this year, he underlines the importance of recognising the role of family in the mutual transmission of life, values, and faith.¹¹ On the one hand,

8 The entire discourse on so-called ‘biblical family values’ has little to do with the gospel. It is most often a less than subtle attempt to perpetuate a particular view of family (and the power dynamics that accompany it). For further comment and literature, see *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, s.v. Family.

9 For an accessible discussion, see Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (London: Doubleday, 1991), esp. pp. 63-81.

10 In no small way, this is thanks to women scholars.

11 ‘Message of his Holiness Francis for World Mission Day 2018,’ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/missions/documents/papa-francesco_20180520_giornata-missionaria2018.html, accessed 4 August 2017.

he points out that you have the wisdom and the experience of older persons that is an example and an encouragement for the young. This is especially true of grandparents, who are so important in a family. They bring, for example, certain wisdom, support, and stability to the family circle, when it comes to problem-solving and dealing with difficult situations. And, on the other hand, you have the freshness and enthusiasm of young persons. They naturally and easily energise a family and are great support and hope for older family members. Here you can easily see the gift of life flowing in *two* directions: from one sector of the family to the other and vice versa. It's very important to realize that in this process we pass on values to each other in ways that are unknown, even to ourselves. And just because we don't see our young people, for example, going to church does not mean that they have not welcomed the life of faith. How faith emerges in a new generation is not always evident, and it can take time, a good deal of time, for it to achieve visibility.

In terms of family life, the unit that is a family is very important, but it is not everything. It is equally important that each person has his or her own space that is separate from the family matrix. Sometimes it is necessary for you to step back from family in order to care for your own self. This is not a negative thing; and, in many ways, it is a healthy sign, when each person has that freedom and is supported by others in doing so. This is very important for older adolescents, who are discovering their own independent identity and need to step back in order to do so. Having other interests outside the family can be extremely important in this regard. It is really a matter of finding the right balance between, on the one hand, being immersed in family life, and, on the other, honouring your own personal space and journey.

All of this means, of course, that there needs to be flexibility at the heart of the contemporary family that creates room for dialogue, for genuine disagreement, for real exchange, for space, and for conversation. Nobody must feel suffocated or alienated or limited in a way that is unhealthy. Older persons must not be so set in their ways that they block change, movement, growth, and, the eventual flourishing of younger members in the family. And on the other side, young persons must not be so foolish as to jettison entirely the world-view of parents and grandparents. This would close off a very important support in the journey to adult life and flourishing.

Of course, family life is not always easy; and, sometimes, it can be very painful, and may even require taking serious steps to deal with a situation. The best way of negotiating the complex world of family life is to pay attention and listen to your mind and to

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your heart.¹² When these rhyme well together, then you know that you have achieved a good balance. But when you find that you are overly worrying about family or stressed by a situation, or a dynamic, or somebody else's actions, then, it is best to step back, reflect, bring your concerns to prayer, and re-negotiate how you are handling things. Talk with your partner if that is a possibility, discuss the issue with another person in the family, and if you still feel that you are being overwhelmed, then, it is time to seek some appropriate support from outside of the family circle.

We are gradually leaving behind us the patriarchal form of family, and, in doing so, moving closer to a gospel-led form that is based on communion, companionship, and compassion. In place of an older form, where values such as hierarchy, order, authority, silence, and duty were considered vital, we now find new values taking centre stage such as equality, sharing, communication, mutual respect, discussion, and dialogue. It needs to be underlined that all of this is making our world a safer and better place-to-live for more and more people, particularly for children. This is the second family, the one that we bring to life ourselves as adults in freedom.

THE FOUNDATIONAL CHRISTIAN FAMILY

There is, I believe, a third stage in the recognition of family, a third family, if you like. And the more you penetrate into the depths of Christian life, the more you become aware of this third form. The first family and, indeed, the second family are, to some degree, transitional, but not the third. It is the recognition that in Christ we humans, together, have become a new and ever abiding family. *This, in fact, is the foundational Christian family*; the one that spans all time, and that gathers together all persons, past, present, and even to come. It is that family of humanity that recognises God to be the Father of us all; that sees that, in Christ, we are all brothers and sisters; and that knows that God's Spirit dwells in every single one of us, no matter who we are, or what our circumstances may be, or where we have come from, or how we even came to this place. When you see this clearly, then, to my mind, you are very close to the very heart of Christian life and redemption. If we all could see this, then, there would be no need for rejection, or hatred, or violence, or war. This third family is barely visible in our world; and, perhaps, the most important task today for those of us who strive to live by faith is making it more visible. In that family, we, each, have a place, a story, and a destiny.

12 See Michael A. Conway, 'The Underdeveloped Heart,' *The Furrow* 67 (2016): 259-65; *ibid.*, 'The Developing Heart,' *The Furrow* 67 (2016): 583-94.