

# *Cherishing*

THE FAMILY

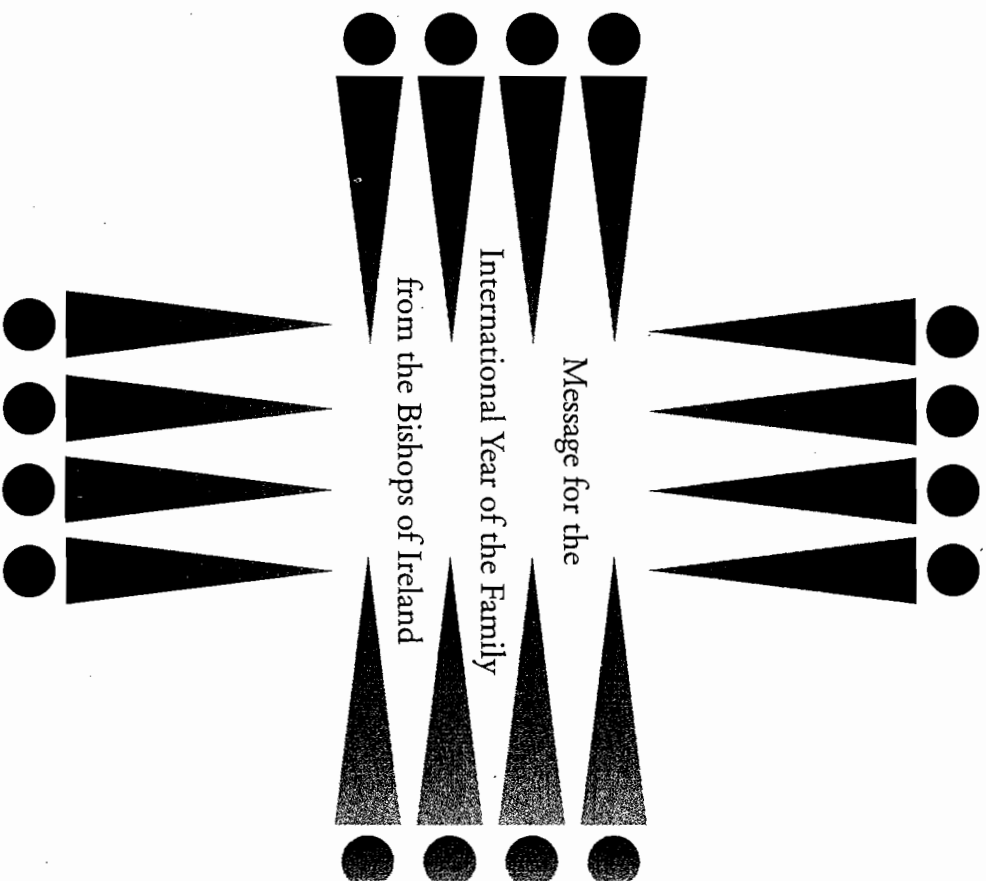


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VERITAS

## Introduction

'The celebration of the Year of the Family gives me a welcome opportunity to knock at the door of your home, eager to greet you with deep affection and to spend some time with you'. We are very happy to make these words of Pope John Paul our own. So it is with great respect that we write this personal letter to you. As we enter your home we know we can find the person of Christ in everyone whether your life is lived as married, single, separated, widowed or in any other situation. We hope you will find in these words encouragement to celebrate what is good in your life, help towards a better understanding of what is painful and a promise of support for you in whatever way you now experience your family life.

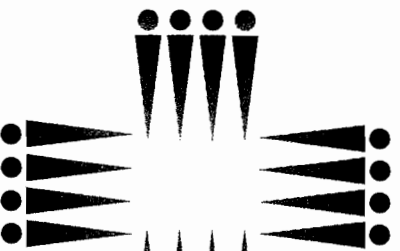
Both Church and society recognise that we are enriched by the good that exists in families. Society likes to speak of families as 'the smallest democracy'; the Church, by long tradition, speaks of family as the 'Church of the home'. Even where elements of the wholeness of family life are absent, the Church recognises the presence of much love, dedication and patience.

As priests and bishops we have frequently been welcomed at many of your firesides. We have the greatest admiration for all who live their marriages faithfully and rear their children as best they can. Sometimes this is done in the face of great difficulty. May this year be a time of great hope for all. These difficulties, when lived through and coped with, can be a source of growth for families. We pray for you who are struggling with family difficulties, that you will find from your own resources, or aided by society and the Church, a greater sense of your own worth and a way forward.

In days gone by, families may have found it easier to give each other support in time of need. We have found the need to put in place certain ways of providing help for those who are suffering. Frequently people who need help are unaware that such exists. We hope that we can help you to know more about what is available and to make more use of what we already have in this area.

## Part one Family and Society

### Celebrating the Year of the Family



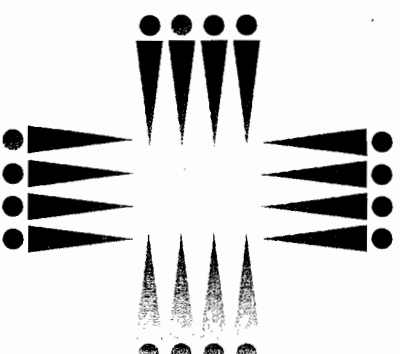
The Year of the Family is a time for recognising and giving thanks for all that is good in our family lives. Much that is good in Irish life comes from the health of Irish family life. We know that there is a great deal of love and affection. There is a lot of laughter, happiness and fun. In many Irish families great patience and tolerance is evident in coping with teenage anxieties, ill health and the sad events surrounding bereavement or separation. The example of families looking after aged and sick parents in the home is most inspiring. A sense of humour is a great help. Many Irish families have inherited traditional caring attitudes towards families in their neighbourhood.

All of this, we know, is celebrated in the big family occasions like births, marriages, anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas and Easter; in sacramental occasions such as First Holy Communion and Confirmation; and in simple ways — family holidays, picnics, trips to sporting events and outings to the seaside.

Our interest in tracing ancestry and webs of relationships says something important about our sense of belonging. Thank God the extended family is still very much a reality in Irish life today.

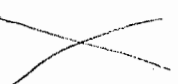
### Patterns of Family Life

All of us are members of families. Everybody is somebody's son or daughter or grandchild. You may be somebody's spouse; or somebody's sister, brother, uncle, aunt or cousin. You may be a father or mother, a grandparent. You may be married, single, widowed, separated, adopted, an adoptive or lone parent. People are also at different stages in family life and play different roles. We all fit into and have a part to play in family life.

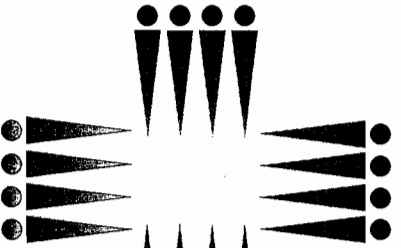


### Factors Affecting Family Life in Ireland

We are all aware of how rapid social change has been affecting and how it continues to affect family life. The rise of unemployment, a new wave of emigration, the marginalisation of some groups and new expectations regarding the role of men and women all affect family life. Some women feel the need within themselves to seek employment in the work-force while economic expectations and realities compel others to work outside the home. Coping with teenagers in a consumerist world is more difficult. There is the apparent rise of domestic violence, the physical and sexual abuse of children and the continuing abuse of alcohol and other addictive substances. The mass media and especially TV have broadened our horizons, bringing the wide world into our homes. They also convey ambivalent messages about violence, create confusion about sexuality and distort the image of family life. Even apart from programme content the very presence of a TV set, switched on for hours, has its own effect on our lives.



## Part two The Family and the Church



We believe our time is calling for a new partnership between Church and home. There is need for a new covenant, a more loving relationship between each little family and the wider Church community. The self-giving, self-sacrificing love of Christ for his Church is mirrored in the love that permeates many homes. The same life-giving love grows and is a source of peace and harmony in the community of the family.

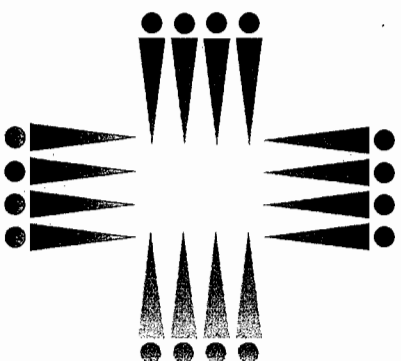
This vision is rooted in God's feelings for his people as revealed so richly in the Old and New

Testament. There we find the creative God fashioning an equal female partner for man so that he will not be lonely or alone and giving them both the power to increase and multiply and bring a family into being. God at times appears to be distant, but really God is intimate and interested in every aspect of the human condition: with his people on their desert march, in their journeys into and out of exile. God is protector and carer, minder and love-maker. He mysteriously visited the childless couple Abraham and Sarah. This caring God brought about love and marriage for Isaac and Rebecca after a loving gesture of friendship at a desert well.

The life and ministry of Jesus is a supreme lesson for family living. He was born in poor and unpromising circumstances, grew up among plain working class people at Nazareth, found his sponsors in the ancient Simeon and Anna at the Temple. As a boy entering his teens he caused momentary anxiety to Mary and Joseph when they thought they had lost him in the thronged Jerusalem. His first sign was performed at a marriage feast. He found time for all sorts of people with personal and family problems: the woman at the well involved in a complicated web of conflicting relationships. He enjoyed genuine human companionship with the twelve, the seventy-two, especially in the family setting of Martha and Mary and Lazarus



at Bethany. The Gospels are very rich in incidents and detail, the unconventional Mary Magdalen, the woman healed at the touch of his garment. Jesus too stood at many a door and knocked. He wept with many a bereaved family and tenderly took the little dead girl by the hand. Always his mission was that of inward healer, not just friendly external associate, restoring life, healing the sick and cleansing people of the leprosy of sin.



The Church is Christ's presence in our troubled world and, as every school child will tell you, we are the Church in its most literal and widest sense. We, with all our problems, seemingly insoluble situations, are the Church. Because we are the Church we have to try to be all the things to one another that Jesus was to people of his day. As your Bishops, we see ourselves as the ones who are to keep reminding you and encouraging you never to lose sight of these great mysteries and never to tire in trying to be of service to your family and to all families as Jesus was in the family of God and continues to be in his human family, the Church.

The Church which was founded to establish the Kingdom on earth sees family as a fruitful fountain and source for humanity where in turn people are born into life, and live to the full their God-given task. Human nature moves people to enter relationships of love that hold, at least, the promise of unity and permanence. This human state is placed into a new dimension by the presence of Christ in the human condition and living family life in Nazareth for thirty years. The Christian understanding of family is of mother, father and children united in a bond of married love. This is the completeness of family where people are aware of the blessings they share and the witness they give to Christian living. They must never cease to

## Part three The Caring Church

work and pray for each other's welfare within the family and for the ongoing personal growth and development which marriage entails.

This ideal situation is not always the visible reality. Many families suffer the pain of absence or brokenness. These are true families also whose love is often deepened with suffering as they struggle towards wholeness. We know and realise that many of you in these situations are the face of the suffering Christ being presented to our world. You continue to offer a great deal in the way of dedication and example within your families and communities.

The Church is part of and exists for an imperfect and fragile world where the family is the victim of many pressures, pressures which can be either destructive or sources of growth. In our own country in the last century the problems were often economic. Famine and destitution were never far from the door. Our ancestors left us a saying: 'ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine' - meaning, in effect, that they survived by supporting each other. They faced the danger together ... people together in pain ... in the pain of Christ - truly an ecclesia, an eaglais - a caring Church community. They were there for each other, together like a 'meitheal'.

Today people are also there together for each other. Even if the extended family is not what is used to be, the tradition survives and the close friends are at hand when the family foundations come under pressure. This is surely the 'front line' and we feel deeply for all who experience pain. We want to support and affirm those committed to providing help and be one with those who are suffering.

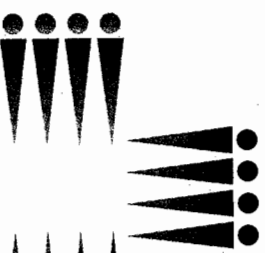
In this year designated as the Year of the Family we return to the theme of the family as a little Church and the Church as the larger family. We are all sisters and brothers. We all have a need to be valued and appreciated for ourselves and not for what we achieve. It is the family in need that needs other families.

We write especially to you who have known brokenness and pain in your family life. Bishops are members of families. We have sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews. We too have experienced the pains and joys that are part of every family. In your pain and brokenness we want to reassure you that you are very close to the mystery at the heart of the Church, the dying and rising of Christ. All of us have been enriched by the courage, dignity and faith of people in their hours of darkness. We thank you for that inspiration and gift.

Leaders in the Christian community want to respond to and support the family in all its stages. We see marriage as centrally important: 'because married love is freely given, it is a reflection of the love that God has for all people. In Christian marriage the couple are bound together through their relationship with Christ, and their married love reveals something of the love of Christ for the world'.\* New and changing situations demand new responses. We would like to share with you some of our efforts to be of service to family life through our Catholic agencies.

The CMAC (Catholic Marriage Advisory Council) tries to promote a thoughtful and reflective approach to marriage, to provide help for mar-

\* *Families our Hidden Treasure*, Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, p.13



riages in difficulty and to promote a greater understanding of human relationships. Our many voluntary CMAC counsellors give generously of their time in the care of married people. We also wish to acknowledge other programmes which try to help young people in personal and emotional development.

CURA: Recent statistics show that increasingly more babies are born to single mothers, some of whom are very young. The discovery of an unex-

pected pregnancy can be a traumatic experience for the young mother and father and their families and friends. CURA tries to reflect the compassion and care of the Church for those mothers and babies. Many voluntary workers and host families open their homes to these young women.

**FAMILY MINISTRY:** This very important service reflects the priority given to the family in the life of the Church. It provides support, healing and enrichment for all stages of family. Parenting Programmes, Bereavement Groups, Beginning Experience (for widowed and separated people) Rainbows for all God's Children (for children who have lost a parent through death or separation) and Marriage Enrichment Programmes are just some of the services offered by the Church in its ministry to families in need.

#### Parents and Children

Children are the most personal fruit of the parents' love for each other. They project that love right on through the parents' lives and indeed long after their death. Parents are the first educators. The happy development of children derives from the security of home and the stability of a good

relationship with their parents. We wish to acknowledge the extraordinary life-giving love of parents for their children.

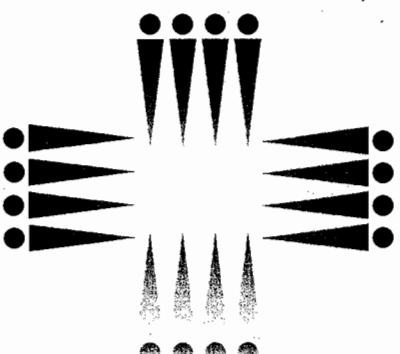
At local level the support that neighbours and extended family give to each other must never be underestimated. As members of the Church we must always open our door and not build walls of indifference, apathy or competition as a consumer society sometimes tempts us to do.

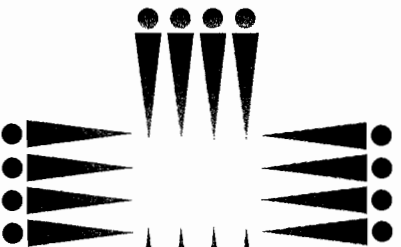
#### Daily Work of Priests and Religious

Traditionally priests and religious have always been welcomed in Irish homes. Priest and religious on the one hand and families on the other benefit greatly from this constant contact with each other. Pastors have a privileged role at the high and low moments of family life. In rural Ireland Station Masses are always happy occasions, a lovely celebration of a family that opens its doors in welcome to Christ's presence in the Eucharist and in its neighbours. Priests and religious share your sorrow too when they walk the painful road to the cemetery to bury your dead.

At this stage we would like to acknowledge the work of other agencies who are caring for the family, though not Church-related. We may not share all of their philosophy or ideas but we would like to nurture a relationship of respect and esteem for their efforts to promote human well-being insofar as they share our Christian principles.

We salute all those who, with great generosity, serve the needs of family.

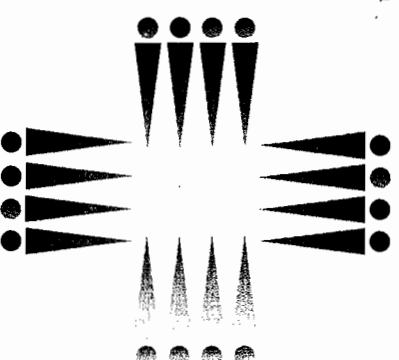




**SPIRITUALITY:** In Ireland the family is still the place where the faith is nurtured and most effectively passed on with the help of the school and the local Church. In the daily experience of welcome and forgiveness, praise and affirmation, healing and sharing of meals together, the Sacraments find human expression in the family. The Irish tradition of prayer in the home is at the heart of the Christian family. The Rosary Beads, Sacred Heart picture and Holy Water are symbols deeply embedded in our memory of family prayer. The traditional forms of prayer are as valid today as ever but can be supplemented and replaced by new forms of prayer. We would encourage you to create the space and time that makes daily prayer possible in your home. As Christian families the Word of God read, reflected on and responded to must always have an important place in our family life.

In growth in prayer and faith in the family many young people come to hear the call of God to the priesthood and the religious life.

## Conclusion



We began this letter with words from Pope John Paul's letter to families. We feel that we should leave you with a final word from him. In another letter written as far back as 1981 he concludes with these comforting words : 'No one is without a family in this world; the Church is a home and family for everyone; especially for those "who labour and are heavy laden".'

It is up to us all to make these words come true in 1994. The test of our commitment to family will be the measure of our support and our compassion. We rejoice in the good that is all around us in family life and celebrate with the wider world and particularly with the family of the Church all that we receive in homes where love spreads itself around.