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The Family: A Place of Refuge - p.4

The Family: A Place of Healing - p.7

The Family: A Place for Catechism - p.10

Called to Serve - p.14



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P R E S S

CONTENTS



page 4



page 7



page 10



page 18



page 19

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FEATURES

4 The Family: A Place of Refuge

By Dr. Gene Edward Veith, Director of the Cranach Institute, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

The home, at its best, is a refuge, a place where both children and adults can find a haven from the world, with all of its conflicts and politics, a place of love and acceptance and security, in marked contrast to the dog-eat-dog atmosphere that has become common from the workplace to the pecking orders of the school social scene.

7 The Family: A Place of Healing

By Dr. Beverly K. Yahnke, Executive Director of Christian Counseling Services, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

So what has become of the faithful family our Lord intended for His children to inhabit? Has the healing family, a place of teaching, comfort, and refuge become nothing more than an enigma for postmodern minds? Thanks be to God, the furor and froth of the culture may surround Christian families, but God's children are alive, well, rooted in Christ, and serving powerfully in their vocations.

10 The Family: A Place for Catechism

By the Rev. Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II, Dean of Pastoral Education and Placement, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Clearly Luther meant that this little book he was composing would have an honored and useful place in the Christian family. It was intended to be devotional, meaty but digestible, expressed in language that wasn't just for trained theologians but for fathers, mothers, and kids.

13 What Does This Mean?

Called to **SERVE**

Vocation: Proclaiming the Sure Word of Our Lord Jesus Christ p. 16

85 Years of Deaconess History Starting in Fort Wayne p. 18

Faculty Reaching out to Colleagues in Madagascar p. 22

AlumNews p. 30



Courtesy: Concordia Historical Institute

The Family:

A Place of Refuge

By Dr. Gene Edward Veith

Being a part of a family—a son or daughter, a father or mother, a husband or wife, a brother or sister, uncle or aunt, grandfather or grandmother—is a calling from God. According to the Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation, God places each of us into particular stations (the family, the workplace, the church, and the nation) where we are to live out our faith in love and service to our neighbors. The family is the most fundamental calling of them all.

God could have populated the earth simply by making more people out of dust and ribs, as He did Adam and Eve, but instead, explained Luther, He chose to work the miracle of creating new life by means of the vocation of mothers and fathers, husbands and wives. God's institution of the family is perhaps the most dramatic

example of how He Himself is at work in ordinary human vocations, creating children (through the sexuality of marriage), caring for them (through the everyday work of parenting), and bringing them to Himself (as parents bring their children to Baptism and the life of the church).

God protects the family with His commandments and His promises. When we pray to God as “Our Father,” it is not ascribing to Him the attributes of human fathers, but rather the reverse: human fatherhood comes from the fatherhood of God. Marriage, the forming of a family, is not something that human beings can re-invent to accommodate different sexual preferences; rather, it was not only established by God, but it is, in its very nature, Christological, a “mystery” embodying the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31-32).

The Large Catechism cites the family as the model of all other vocations in its exposition of the Fourth Commandment: “We have three kinds of fathers presented in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household [i.e., employers], and fathers of the nation. Besides these, there are also spiritual fathers—not like those in the papacy who applied this title to themselves but performed no fatherly office. For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the Word of God.” If we would only keep this commandment, Luther observes, “Then all would be well; parents would have more happiness, love, kindness, and harmony in their houses, and children would win their parents’ hearts completely.”

Of course, we do not keep this commandment or fulfill God’s design for the family. Our homes are often places of disharmony, with husbands and wives at each other’s throats, and parents and children tormenting each other. The divorce rate approaches 50%, and—in what is one of the most tragic scandals in the church today—the divorce rate among Christians is slightly *above* that of non-Christians. What has gone wrong, and how can we recover the blessings of the Christian family?

Invasions and Competition

The home, at its best, is a refuge, a place where both children and adults can find a haven from the world, with all of its conflicts and politics, a place of love and acceptance and security, in marked contrast to the dog-eat-dog atmosphere that has become common from the workplace to the pecking orders of the school social scene.

And yet, we often bring the world, in all of its destructiveness, into our homes. The TV that is on all the time brings fighting, yelling, sexual immorality, and rebellion into our living rooms and into the imaginations of not just children but adults.

The outside world takes precedence over the family. Husbands and wives often do not spend enough time together. Parents often do not spend enough time with their kids, with fathers reportedly spending an average of less than half an hour a day with their sons and daughters.

Part of the problem is that we allow our other callings to take precedence over our marriages and our children. The family is the fundamental vocation, which means that we must not neglect it in favor of our work and our social responsibilities. Nor should our involvement with the church be such that it causes us to neglect our families. (Many churches have so much going on that conscientious members are often spending so much time there that they have less for their spouses and children, a problem that sometimes comes from that violation of the Doctrine of Vocation that believes that “spiritual” activities are more pleasing to God than the activities of our callings that God has given us.)

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Loving and Serving

The purpose of every vocation is to love and serve our neighbors, not primarily to love and serve God—in our relationship with Him, He first loves and serves us, in Jesus Christ, apart from any works of our own. In restoring us through His grace by Word and Sacrament, enabling us to love God, He then sends us out into our vocations, where we live out our faith by loving and serving our neighbors. On the job, we love and serve our customers, clients, and fellow employees through the work that we do for them. In our society, we love and serve our fellow citizens by voting, obeying the law, and working to make our community and country a better place. In the church, we love and serve our fellow members by singing in the choir, passing out bulletins, serving in church offices and on committees, and building up the spiritual fellowship. So who are our neighbors in the family?

In the calling of marriage, a husband’s neighbor is his wife. He is to love and serve her. The wife’s neighbor is her husband. She is to love and serve him.

Scripture, as in the Table of Duties in the catechism, describes how this love and service are to be carried out. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:22) Again, we see that God Himself is present in vocation, so that Christ is

literally in marriage, so that wives submitting to their husbands are submitting to Christ Himself. This, of course, is very unpopular advice today, not just that women should submit to a man, but that anyone should “serve” anyone else, putting someone else’s needs above one’s own.

But just as wives are told to submit to their husbands, husbands are told to “give themselves up” for their wives: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). So how did Christ love the church? By harsh domination? By forcing the church to wait on His every whim? No. “Though He was in the form of God” He “made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7). He gave Himself up, “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2:8), out of love for His church.

That is how a husband is called to love his wife, denying himself for her sake. This rules out every kind of selfish demand, every authoritarianism, much less cruelty and abuse, with husbands instead emulating the self-sacrificial love of Christ. When a wife feels loved like that, it is much easier for her to submit to a husband whom she knows is giving himself up for her.

In this dynamic relationship of submission and self-sacrifice, there is no room for power-plays or manipulation or tests, just each partner serving the other, putting the other first.

In the case of parenting, fathers and mothers love and serve their neighbors, which, in this particular vocation, would be their kids. In the vocation of being a child, the neighbors who are to be loved and served would be their parents.

Children are to love and serve their parents by obeying them (Eph. 6:1). Parents love and serve their children by disciplining them, teaching them, and catechizing them in God’s Word; but it does not include actions that would “provoke your children to anger” (Eph. 6:4). Again, the Biblical and vocational model rules out any kind of cruelty or child abuse, which involves harming one’s children instead of loving and serving them.

It may not seem very “spiritual” to think that the ordinary routines of parenting—driving the kids to soccer practice; fixing them dinner; playing with them; dealing with their bad behavior; getting them ready for

church—should be ways that we are living out our Christian faith, but God Himself is caring for our children through these very mundane-seeming actions. Luther went so far as to say how a mother changing her baby’s diaper is doing a holier work than all the monks in all the monasteries. She is acting in her vocation, and she is loving and serving her neighbor, namely, her baby.

If husbands would focus on loving and serving their wives, who, in turn, would focus on loving and serving their husbands; and if the two of them would concentrate on loving and serving their kids, who would love and serve their parents, then the family would indeed be a refuge. There would be no divorces, no generational conflicts. No one would need to put his or her own needs first, since the others would be fulfilling those needs. The pressures and temptations of the world would remain—since we have vocations there, as well—but the family would be a safe haven.

It is our sinful nature, of course, which keeps this ideal of loving and serving from happening, even though it would bring us happiness, so families must also be a place of forgiveness. Husbands and wives must always be forgiving each other. Parents must forgive their children. Children must forgive their parents.

All must go to that true refuge, the church, where they can receive the forgiveness won by Christ. In confession, according to the words of the catechism, Luther says to “consider your

station in light of the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter” and to have recourse to another vocation through which God works, receiving absolution “from the pastor as from God Himself.” The Word of God that the pastor proclaims and Christ’s Sacraments that come through the pastor’s voice and hands convey the life-changing Gospel that gives healing for our brokenness and for that of our families. We then are sent back into our families and our other vocations to grow, despite trials and failures, in holiness and love.

Dr. Veith is Director of the Cranach Institute located at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.



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