

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Housework

Cleaning and polishing, washing, drying, ironing, starching, shopping and cooking form part of my life (priests, like everyone else, do housework.) Hurrah!

### Working At Home

I wonder what the received wisdom is today about housework? Is it still *unpaid drudgery*, a way of preserving the subjugation of women and keeping them from the levers of male power? I hope not. I suppose I'm mad to write this down, and will probably be called names for it, but I think the value of housework can be almost mystical. I think the home itself is a symbol of shared life, and that it can be eloquent and authoritative in the lives of those who live there. If a house is neglected, the home suffers correspondingly; if the house is well-kept, the family is correspondingly blessed. I'm delighted to see everyone sharing in this work, not just "the housewife": as long as it gets done!

### "A Perfect Wife"

Today's poem from Proverbs is hardly a feminist tract. But it proposes, twenty-five hundred years ago, the decisive value of housework for happiness in families. It's a contentious area. Conservative voices speak of the fulfilment proper to being a wife and mother, expressed in the tasks of the home-maker; more up-to-date attitudes proclaim the liberating value of a career, involvement outside the home, and the contribution women have never been allowed to make in the arena of politics and social action, to the great detriment of public and national life. I'm not competent to judge the truth of such broad questions. I also know there are many wives and mothers who are deeply pained by the necessity of their paid employment, imposed by the size of mortgages, etc., cutting off the time they spend with their young children; I also know that many a grandparent is tested to exhaustion by caring for young children to make the breadwinning possible; and I am sure the increase in marriage-breakdown, the greatest curse of our age, is not unconnected with the acceptance of theories of individual "fulfilment" taking the place where we used to look for commitment to, and responsibility for, others. We think we've got so much more choice nowadays; but if it is choice to lessen the sum of human happiness, what have we gained? Children robbed of their mothers or their

fathers, men and women lonely and deeply wounded in their self-value, and a widespread understanding of marriage as an ephemeral "piece of paper" are not good fruits to show for this human development. It takes careful attention to see what is happening in a family. Everyone has a personal, inner experience: the wholeness of a family depends how much that inner world, the world of the heart, is shared with the other members. It's easy to miss the tiny signs that a family member is secretly in trouble, and eventually deeply disturbed.

### Postmodern Family Horror Scenario

Imagine a family: mum and dad at work all hours: children computer-bound in their bedrooms, or out of the home altogether: no dining-table, because no shared meals: separate holidays, separate interests, total absence of communication at any depth. Children growing up at the centre of their own experience, exploiting their families without sharing their lives, parents too busy, tired or depressed to go in search of the lost: distance between family members constantly increasing, as they establish greater and greater independence: the family as a nurturing-ground for selfishness instead of love. A total fiction? I hope so; but we've come to accept the disposable family in this country, and the bitter experiences it has brought us have failed, so far, to bring a change of heart. We Christians have another vision. We must unearth our talent.

*Fr Philip*