

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Your Family Is Holy

Have you ever wondered where the word “family” comes from? It’s a surprise. It comes from the Latin word *famulus*, which means “servant”. A family is a collection of servants. This is very interesting; because there is a Latin word for a set of individuals sharing the same parents (*gens*, the Greek *genos*), and there is a similar Greek word for people who share a home (*oikia*, from which comes our word “ecumenism”, or home-making). But our language has adopted the noble word “family”, as if to install at the heart of the concept the fact that we *serve* one another, we look after one another; and that is far more vital than sharing the same house, or being born of the same blood-line. It is our experience that differences of birth or upbringing can be transcended by love, which expresses itself in service; and service makes you part of the family.

### The Church Is Like That

Because the Church - *insofar as* the Church - is a communion of people caring for each other, we can truthfully call it a family. Jesus said that listening to the word of the Father is what makes it so: *Anyone who hears the word of my Father, and acts on it, is my mother, and sister, and brother*. When a strange bod arrives in a clerical collar and moves into the rectory, the parishioners call him “father” in honour of the fact that he has come to be their servant and their leader in service of each other. They show that this is more than an empty title when they accept his leadership, and experience themselves as a community of servants. Being treated as a brother or a sister is sometimes an amazing experience for people who have felt isolated, lonely, and kinless in the world. Whereas people who belong to happy and powerful families usually take it for granted and don’t even realise how blessed they are.

### Families Within The Church

Something beautiful happens when a good family belongs to the Church. All its wealth of love and affection becomes opened to the rest of the community; a mother finds herself offering maternal care to other people’s children: “only children” become brothers and sisters; childless couples find they have become grandparents; orphans find fatherly care, single people find themselves sitting at a busy hearth. But all of these good and

beautiful things come into their own when there is trouble; someone bereaved is surrounded by loving thought and practical care; a sick person is fed and comforted and healed; a victim of crime or violence is given help and company, and time to regain courage. Insofar as we do these things we “realise” - make real - the Church in its divine destiny to be the family of mankind.

### A School Of The Lord’s Service

This radiant phrase is St Benedict’s title for a monastery, which is a family built purely to embody the spirit of Christian service. Those who have had the privilege of spending a little while in a good Benedictine monastery will understand the meaning. There is nothing bringing the members of the monastery together except the desire to give birth to this community of love and service, where the lineaments of Christ will be revealed, and his presence can be known in genuine lives that set his truth at their heart. The rest of us can learn from the brave spirit of a monastery, and understand how the power of grace can direct and augment our power to live by the Gospel *because we are together*; and where two or three are together in Christ’s name, He is there in their midst.

### Meanwhile, Back At The Ranch

We come tomorrow to the Octave Day of Christmas, and the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. There it is, in a single feast: the most intimately human relative - *mother* - and the most gloriously transcendent word in our language - *God*. The giving of this title to Mary was at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in AD 431, and it is the crown of the Church’s long struggle to find the right words to speak of the Incarnation. For truly, it isn’t enough for us to look on the beauty and grace of our own mothering, and lose sight of the fact that a human mother gave birth to God. Nor can we think of the glorious fact of human love, as it is joyously experienced by so many, and expressed in its highest way in the sacrament of marriage, without remembering the marriage of heaven and earth which is Jesus Christ. Above all, the relationships of every family must be uplifted and transfigured by grace, as we find ourselves capable of greater and greater

likeness to the one who came, not to be  
served, but to serve.

*Fr Philip*