

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## “It’s *Family!*”

The perennial cry of the cast of *Eastenders*, from careworn Pauline to the plug-ugly Mitchells. Does the word mean the same to all of them? It’s a kind of appeal which will always prevail, the ultimate priority, the value that takes precedence over everything else. In the name of family you can be asked, it seems, for nearly anything: to harbour a criminal, to keep a guilty secret, to cough up your life’s savings, to blight your prospects, and to lose your best friend. Here is the prime, and the ultimate community, and certainly we have to say that it does mean something larger than selfishness - even if the end result seems to be a kind of community selfishness. *All of us come first, it says; all for one and one for all - but only if you’re Family!*

### **The Holy Family**

The phrase is not immediately attractive to me, I must confess, because it evokes the pastel shades of a Holy Picture, with its sentimental overtones of serious piety and somnolent calm: so far from my reality; so far, I suspect, from theirs. I want to ask a few questions of these resolved faces: did this Joseph ever go off in a rage by himself because the family was getting him down? Did this Mary ever feel so tired she could not raise the strength to fuel that ever-ready Madonna smile? And did that little boy with the halo ever get his ears boxed to teach him his place? There’s nothing theological about the saccharine images that would deny the Holy Family its humanity: quite the reverse. *God became what we are*, and nothing can stay in our religion that denies or limits the meaning of this. John’s first letter has these wonderful words: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. But any spirit that will not say this of Jesus is not from God, but is the spirit of Antichrist, about whose coming you have been warned.” What does “come in the flesh” mean? we can only answer out of our own experience of being in the flesh: it means illness, pain, vulnerability, desire, longing, disappointment, terror; it means tenderness, closeness, affection, the experience of treasuring another person’s body, the love of irreplaceable others. We have to cleanse our

image of the Holy Family from false piety, and get the message God wants us to hear. After all, the family is one of the problem areas in our Lord’s life as well as ours, and one of the hardest things to get right in the Gospel.

### **The New Family**

is the people who listen to Jesus’ word (Mk 3:33), the people who follow him carrying the Cross, renouncing all other relationships (Lk 14:25). For them there will be a new family (Lk 19:28) and Jesus will give them to each other (Jn 19:25) so that the world will see them as signs of the love of the Father (Jn 18:21). So even for a good human family, there is a new vocation: it has to be ready for change and transformation.

### **Mary – a transformed motherhood**

Mary is told by Simeon how convulsive this will be for her: *You see this Child? He is destined for the fall and the rising of many in Israel - and a sword shall pierce your own soul too.* Mary will have to leave behind her motherhood and its prerogatives, so that she too becomes the disciple of her Son, and learns to follow him faithfully from Nazareth to Jerusalem, from the cradle where she ministers the gifts of humanity, to the Cross where she will be one with his divine sacrifice to the Father. She needs time and prayer to accomplish these things: *she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.* So at last she comes to the moment when the Spirit is poured out upon the Church, and Luke brings her back to be present at Pentecost (Acts 1:14) when the Gospel starts to be proclaimed from the housetops.

### **Giving Christ To Each Other**

Our families are also schools of love, schools of the Spirit. We must love one another with great love and attention, so that the Spirit may lead our families to embody the Gospel, for the life of the world. May he who came to share our nature, teach us to share his love for all who live; but may it begin with a deep, healing, understanding fondness for the ones who share our life most closely, and who with us will become disciples of Jesus. *Fr Philip*