

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Show Him Sympathy

I can't help feeling the oddity of the Feast of the Holy Family, where it is held up as a *model* for our families. Late in life I've realised the extent of an earlier Church's unease with sexuality. It seems strange to us that so many of the Fathers of the Church were convinced that Original Sin was passed on down the generations through the presence of sin *at the moment of our conception*; that is what people like Gregory the Great and Augustine sadly believed. They could apparently imagine no chaste experience of sex, equating it with what they called *concupiscence*, which is, put plainly, lust. It is the "lust" that went into our conception, they thought, that passed on to us Adam's sin. I think there was a good deal of sin in the very idea!

### Chaste As The Lily Flower...

The person I feel sorry for in all this is St Joseph. Clearly people thinking like that couldn't allow *concupiscence* to enter into the picture of Jesus' conception. Fortunately they didn't have to, because the story of his virginal conception was in place from the beginning. But they also had to preserve Mary from subsequent *concupiscence* by calling her "ever-virgin": which means that poor Joseph lived a difficult life of sexual abstinence for the rest of his days. (I can testify to its difficulty in itself, but then I've never had to practice it whilst being married to someone, which must be *awfully* difficult). Now, the writers of pious stories about saints were kind to Joseph. They saw his problems at once: firstly, that the Gospel itself often speaks of Jesus' brothers and sisters; secondly, that Joseph looks somewhat ineffectual (especially when he's depicted in pious statuary and holy pictures holding a lily flower). Ingeniously they disposed of the two problems together: Jesus had *half*-brothers and sisters *because Joseph had been married before!* What's more, this permits him to be depicted as exhausted by old age, and no longer interested in such hanky-panky: and I see relics of this in the choice of the first reading today: *Support your father in his old age...Even if his mind should fail, show him sympathy.* Joseph's great hope in this circumstance is that he might aspire to be patron saint of the dying (having Jesus and Mary at his bedside). The Christian artists have all joined in, depicting a Mary who sits in full radiant light, youthful and chastely beautiful, her divine child in her lap, and Joseph, a brown heap in the

background, worn out with his poorly-rewarded toil, asleep in the shadows, out of it. He is human at one remove: a virgin husband, a foster-father, a guardian of the holy family. Show him sympathy! He deserves it.

### Twenty-First Century Christian Family

I am delighted that we have shelved the daft theory of *concupiscence* as transmitting original sin, but I think we have a long way to go in finding a new understanding of the family. The Church has never explicitly disowned the notion that virginity is automatically a higher way of life than marriage, even though virginity is not a sacrament, and marriage is; the glorious sacramental life of married love has thereby been undervalued. But the shoots of a growing understanding are greening on the tree. In 1984 the new Code of Canon Law revised its understanding of the married relationship. No longer was *procreation* its sole aim: rather, it is "for the good of the spouses and the procreation of children". For the first time, the Church kicked into touch that bad idea about married love carrying the stigma of sin.

### Here Be Saints!

I think I'd like to see another policy-shift to take notice of this wonderful change. I'm tired of the stream of canonisations of priests and nuns, often from almost forgotten 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century congregations, that stream from the Vatican every year. I am waiting for a stream of canonised couples to enter the ranks of the saints *because they were good lovers*, fathers and mothers of families, the sort of people who are too busy struggling to make money for shoes and sausages to spend time cultivating a halo. We might find some unmarried or divorced ones too, who suffered the sharpest wound of rejection to prepare them for their struggle. I feel sure that their holiness, invisible to many of us, is well known to God. I'd like to start looking at them with his infinitely tender and loving gaze, and give them honour. *Fr Philip*