

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Family

I suppose I think of family life as the Church does: as the essential condition for humanity, as we know it, to exist. We have many relationships, many that we have chosen - friends, spouses, business partners - and some that we haven't, but which have arrived in our lives through the decision of others - schoolmates, teachers, the friends and spouses of others, colleagues of all sorts. None of these actually resembles the relationship with one's family. If you try to lump them in with the second group, on the grounds that *you can't choose your relations*, you find you're at odds with yourself. If in any sense you "unchoose" your family, like those horrifying children in America who've "divorced" from their parents, then you've lost touch with your own being. Inescapably we are bound up with the nature and the being of our parents (and thus to our brothers and sisters too). Their nature, and their coming-together, makes ours possible. They have given us all we are. Nothing can dissolve that formal dependence of our lives on the lives of our father and mother.

Rule Four

Honour your Father and Mother, that your life may be long in the land which the Lord gives you. This commandment is the first one that governs relationships between human beings (rather than those with God). So it carries a certain primary force. To be right about those who gave you your life, your character, your features, your very flesh, is essential for your happiness; *long life* here means a balanced, reliable existence. We cannot expect to enjoy our inheritance if we have disowned those who gave it. Rather, to understand our kinship with our family is to found our powers of sympathy and our humanity in a life that is not only shared, but organically one thing. I can't help thinking that our earliest experience, unborn, remains powerful throughout life. What we learn in the darkness of the womb is surely a *community* of life too deep to be properly expressed. That total dependence of life on life, child on mother, predates and outclasses all later experiences of trust and sharing. It is a silent, wordless lesson taught by the generosity and endurance of the flesh itself, and not by any engineered concepts. I imagine that few mothers could express in words what they experience in

those months; and that the unborn child absorbs truths in that secret school which may never be forced into words, thoughts, or feelings in the life ahead. The Psalmist refers to this mystery in Ps 138/9, ascribing to the hand of God alone the formation of a child in the womb. This meditation is enough for a lifetime: in its depths the personal experience of creation, the touch of God's hand, can be felt by parents and child alike, and this is what is to be *honoured* if our life is to *be long in the land*.

Jesus At Nazareth

When the second Person of the Trinity set aside his glory to become what we are, he accepted that nine-month apprenticeship to humanity. He accepted the existence of an embryo: two-celled, then four, then eight: he received the wondrous and intimate nurture of his mother, and suffered the tumult of human birth. Launched into time and change, God grew and changed as we do, living in the limitations we know. Can we doubt that the burdens they bore for each other were as heavy as ours sometimes are, or that Jesus sometimes felt in himself that "*the spirit is willing indeed, but the flesh is weak*"? No. The Son of God was tried in the furnace of human relationship, in every way that we are. Our belonging to him is at its closest when our love for each other is most costly.

Fr Philip