

The gentle smiling face of the Church

January 1962 editorial

A Teams couple became involved in dealing with “troublesome youths”. Although exercising a measure of discretion, they were open to them and, surprisingly, this proved an extraordinary experience to these youths. They discovered a reality of which they had no inkling, namely a loving couple. For some, it was a healing experience, a blossoming of their personality. This is because, in fulfilling their apostolic mission, a Christian couple have exceptional resources available to them which I would like to invite you to become aware of. I fear that, through habit, you may lose sight of these prodigious riches of yours of which you must be the worthy dispensers to so many “poor people” around you.

I will illustrate my article with testimonies from a recent survey on the apostolate of the couple. In this instance, I will restrict myself to this apostolate of the couple and deal, another time, with the wider apostolate.

Your riches are of two kinds: human riches and riches of grace.

Human riches

The first human richness, source of all others and the most precious, is your married love. How well one of you had understood this who, in his reply to the survey, had written: “*An apostolic couple must be a couple in love: it is the only way to make someone envious*”. But your married love has borne fruits; from it has sprung out a multiplicity of loves of exceptional value - fatherly love, motherly tenderness, filial love, brotherly love – that make a Christian home a unique place in the world. The picture that this home conveys offers so many varied facets according to times and occasions: meals and evenings spent together, days of work and days of celebrations, painful moments, happy and joyful times (I do not forget the case of childless couples with their particular riches... but that is another matter).

You seem sometimes to ignore to what extent these family riches are unknown to many people: to the child on Social Care, to some immigrant students, to the couple who made a bad start. For such as these, to enter the above kind of home is to discover a new world. “*A non-Christian foreign home-help, seeing our twenty year old son respectfully and affectionately embracing his mother one morning, had a tear in her eyes as she said: AI’NT YOU LUCKY!*” Such a loving climate restores the inner balance of those welcomed into such a home. At last their heart, hitherto deprived of love, is nourished and begins to live again. Were they to travel the whole world over, nowhere would they find anything to compare with the riches of a home where mutual love reigns.

For the guests in such a home, the transition from human love to divine love happens imperceptively. Just as one goes upstream to reach the source of a river, so discovering human love brings one to perceive divine love: the Trinitarian love that married love reflects and which is the source of all love. A family which is “one as the Father and the Son are one” gives an insight into the mystery of God and, so to speak, familiarises one with this mystery. It does so all the better because it expresses itself in the most understandable and universal language, the international language ‘par excellence’: that of love. We may not know the language spoken in a home that we visit, but we cannot fail to understand the message it conveys if, in that home, husband and wife love each other and parents and children love one another.

A home where there is mutual love and which does not hide the fact that it owes its love to Christ, reveals another fundamental truth: namely that, wherever Christ is present, he heals, reconciles and brings peace. “Our love”, wrote one of you, “must proclaim to everyone the victory of Christ over evil”. A young girl said to her oldest sister, a wife and mother for six years already, “Were we to doubt of love, we would only need to see you to be reassured!”

Richness of grace

The Christian couple is not content to offer human riches and to reveal fundamental truths, they give their guests the richness of grace by which they live. It is this grace that we must now briefly assess.

Its great spiritual richness is the presence of Christ who transforms this family community into a "little church". *"When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them"*; to this Tertullian added: *"When two are together, there the Church is"*. No doubt, this presence of Christ and of the Church remains invisible. The Muslim or Jew who come to this home are not aware of it, but their lack of knowledge does not prevent Christ acting. Christians themselves, often including priests also, experience great spiritual benefits from visiting such a home. Listen to this testimony: *"A religious, having spent some time with a large family for a period of rest, said to his hostess as he left: 'You can have no idea of the comfort and peace that contact with a family like yours can provide'. I believe that, if a priest is going through a crisis, as sometimes happens in their 40s, there is no better way of rediscovering his balance than to share for a time in the life of a Christian family."*

This mystery of Christ and of the Church envelops and has a deep influence on visitors to such a home. Many of you have told us of the renewal and deepening of Christian life as well as of conversions that have occasionally taken place in their home. *"An 'au pair' helper who spent only a year with us came from a mountain region with a Christian background. For such people, coming to live in a town was thought to lead to loss of faith. She learnt in our home how the Christian life can be experienced in the context of a big town. When she left us, she had become a girl-guide leader. Her example made a big impression on her native village. Another 'au pair' helper, who came from a densely populated part of our big town that has poor education facilities and where the faith is not practised, became a Young Christian Worker activist when she lived with us and led a YCW group which she had founded. Both these helpers were fully involved in our family life; sharing in our meals and our conversations, freely and willingly taking part in our family prayer, involving themselves in the religious education of our youngest children and helping in their catechesis."*

After this rapid assessment of your human and spiritual riches, you will understand why it is said of a couple that they are "an exceptionally effective instrument of apostolate". There, divine grace and riches make use of the most modest as well as the most attractive human realities in order to communicate themselves. I am referring to all these riches of love that we spoke about a moment ago. How poor, in a way, is the isolated apostle by comparison with the couple-apostle! Of course the priest who visits a sick person and gives absolution, has exceptional powers for transmitting grace; the ministry of a priest, however, is different from a visit of a Christian family. One of you has expressed it in admirable terms:

"The Christian home is the gentle smiling face of the Church".

We can therefore affirm that a Christian home is a providential staging post on the way to the Church. In such a home, without knowing it, the unbeliever makes a first contact with the Church; the sinner experiences its mercy; the poor and the abandoned discover its motherly care. All those who would never have gone directly to a priest or to the sacraments are gently led there through the influence of a Christian home.

Conversely, members of the clergy can direct to these Christian homes vulnerable and isolated people, people under religious instruction or new converts who need to establish roots in this primary religious community that is the family in order to progress and blossom in their Christian life. *"Because we are known as a Christian home, priests and religious fairly frequently send us people, isolated and at a loss, who need the staging-post of a family cell before they can integrate themselves in the wider community of the parish. These are often people traumatised by life who need human warmth and presence. What they are mostly seeking is a climate of security provided by a healthy environment"*.

To carry out satisfactorily the Church mission that is the apostolate by the couple in the home, married Christians must have a great concern to grow in their human and spiritual riches and to show to their visitors those virtues that are the charm and grace of Christian hospitality. If we are to believe one of you who seems to me to be over severe: *“Even when our Christian homes are a success at the human level, with good human relationships, they are all too often sad homes. The “sad virtue” is a little too widespread in Teams in particular. It is useless, in these conditions, to expect an effective apostolate from these ‘extinguishers’.”* Others say that: *“to have a radiating influence, a couple must be simple, true, loving and joyful”*. *“A couple must show a discreet joy giving the impression that this joy is obtained thanks to the efforts of all and is sustained through goodwill. Those who have been deprived of some blessings will not then be jealous and will partake of the joy”*.

By their apostolate of welcoming hospitality, the Christian couple and family are seen as exercising between the hierarchical Church and the world a “mediating function”. This expression seems a bit ‘over the top’ but, following all that I have just said, is it not the most appropriate expression?

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