

# **THE FAMILY AS SEMINARY: SEEDPLOT FOR VOCATIONS**

Address to National Association of Catholic Families (Sydney)  
25 Feb 07 - by Fr Tim Deeter  
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*Jesus went down with (Mary and Joseph) and came to Nazareth,  
and there He lived under their authority. . .  
And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature,  
and in favour with God and men.*

-- Luke 2:51-52

Vocations to the priesthood and the religious life  
are mainly fostered in strong Catholic families.

When do these vocations flourish?  
When Catholic families flourish.

When do vocations weaken and go down in numbers?  
When Catholic family life is weak.

In other words,  
the crisis in vocations to the priesthood and religious life  
is said, by many observers,  
to be a direct result of the crisis in family life.

If this is true,  
then whatever we can do to stabilise Catholic family life  
and strengthen family ties among the faithful  
will promote good vocations to the service of the Church.

It is not hard to find reasons for this.  
After all, whatever else a true priestly or religious vocation implies,  
it always means that a person is called  
to an above-average practice of virtue  
in the following of Christ.

Concretely,  
this means having the generosity  
to spend a lifetime in serving others  
without counting the cost.

It means having the humility  
to work under authority for the common good.

And above all it means having the charity, born of grace,  
to give up some of life's most precious possessions and prospects  
out of love for God.

The family is the divinely instituted place  
for generosity, humility and charity to first take root  
and, with divine assistance,  
to be cultivated from infancy,  
through childhood and adolescence,  
into adult life.

We speak so casually about grace building on virtue  
that we are liable to miss the profound implications  
of what we are saying.

The grace of vocations needs good soil in which to be planted,  
and the proper conditions  
to develop under God's supernatural care.

There is no soil more necessary  
and no conditions are more important  
than a good family life.

Certainly God is master of His gifts  
and He can, if He wishes,  
dispense with these provisions of nature.

Good vocations have come from very unlikely backgrounds  
and in spite of the most adverse home situations.  
But these exceptions only prove the rule.

In His ordinary providence, however,  
the Lord prepares those He plans to choose  
by making sure they are reared in a family  
where generosity as self-sacrifice  
is shown to their children  
and required of them by the parents;  
where humility is a way of life  
because father and mother exercise their authority  
with kindness  
but with a firm and steady hand;  
and where charity, as the love of God,  
is instilled in the children  
by the practice of prayer and respect for religion  
that becomes almost the family atmosphere.

No one who knows what is going on in modern Western society  
has any illusions about the status of the family.

Irresponsible fathers,  
absentee mothers,  
neglected children,  
broken homes  
are becoming commonplace in one country after another.

We have no choice.  
We who believe that Christ is God,  
believe that He has not neglected His people.

But we must do our part.

We must strive by all manner of means  
to preserve sound Christian values in the family  
and restore them where they have been lost.

And we must beg the Lord of the harvest  
to produce laborers for His vineyard  
by providing such families  
as are the normal seedplot of vocations in the Church.

That is what the Latin word *seminarium* or 'seminary' means:  
a seedplot.

A seedplot needs many things  
if it is to yield a rich harvest.

First,  
the soil must be rich, naturally full of nutrients and minerals,  
and with all the clumps broken up and raked out.

This is why courtship and engagement are so important:  
this is when the couple discover the clods and clumps  
in themselves and one another.

This period of preparation for marriage  
is not a time for selfish indulgence in premarital sex,  
because the heat of passion can disguise reality,  
and when reality is finally revealed after the wedding,  
the result can be disastrous.

If a man and woman are going to be good parents,  
they must break up their own clods and clumps  
and rake out the soil of their lives,  
before they plant any seeds of new life.

Otherwise  
their clumps will crowd and smother the tiny seeds  
and they will grow to be scrawny plants,  
unable to spread and grow properly.

Second,  
the soil must be enriched even further with fertiliser.

We now have fancy store-bought fertilizers  
that come as pellets or liquids,  
but nothing is better than the real thing: manure.

Manure is smelly,  
manure is messy,  
manure is ugly,  
but manure really helps things grow abundantly  
when it is spread around and worked into the soil,  
so that it is no longer visible on the surface.

Courtship and engagement are the time  
when the couple face problems together,  
all the you-know-what that can hit the fan from time to time.

This may come in the form of  
illness  
accident and hospitalisation  
financial problems  
loss of job  
death of a family member or close friend  
or one of the many unexpected glitches that suddenly appear.

These things challenge us to respond  
and they reveal the stuff of which we are made.

Crisis and difficulty are never wanted or sought after,  
but, in the end, they are just as important as –  
if not more important than –  
as the good times we share together.

In fact, the truth of the matter is this:  
the good times are only the rest-stop, the ‘oasis of peace’  
in between the problems and crises in our lives.

But we don’t grow because of good times;  
we grow because we conquer our difficulties.

Any bodybuilder knows  
that you have to tear muscle fibre down  
before it will grow.

The muscle will grow in the rest period between workouts,  
but without the workouts,  
the rest periods are nothing but inactivity and laziness.

So the hard times in life may be a pile of you-know-what,  
but it’s *good* you-know-what  
if we deal with it properly and work together  
to work it into the soil of our lives  
and let it be an agent of nourishment and vitality.

Third,  
a good gardener plans the garden.

He determines the best location for the right amount of sun,  
and he takes into account factors like local winds  
and the expected amount of rain in his area.

He decides what he wants to grow – vegetables, grains or flowers --  
and he plants the seeds in neat rows.

He does not simply scatter the seeds in a haphazard way,  
because not only will the garden be ugly,  
but it will not produce as rich a harvest as it could.

A lot of seeds here, a few seeds there, and no seeds in many places  
will result in some plants strangling one another,  
other plants growing alone and vulnerable,  
and some places in the garden being completely barren.

Fourth,  
the garden, once planted, needs constant attention:  
not only watering and plant food,  
but also protection from birds and rabbits and insects.

The gardener must provide  
a border of some kind – bricks, or marigolds, or fencing –  
to keep stray feet from invading and trampling the garden,  
and to stop unwanted grasses and other plants from coming in.

He must perhaps erect posts and spread netting,  
so that the plants have a chance to grow  
without being eaten by unwanted visitors.

Finally,  
the gardener must regularly inspect the garden,  
to remove weeds,  
to mend broken stems,  
to break off branches and leaves that have withered,  
to encourage larger blossoms and buds by pruning.

The present situation of Catholic family life  
is not radically different from that of the general population.

The number of children in Catholic families has gone down,  
the standard of living has gone up,  
the need of both parents to work to maintain this standard of living  
has likewise increased –  
all in similar percentages as in non-Catholic families.

Fewer children and more money

is supposed to bring pleasant results:

- families do not have to 'go without' as they did in the past,
- there is less stress on marriages with fewer children to care for,
- money goes further with fewer mouths to feed.

The interesting thing, to me,

is that it hasn't worked out that way at all.

Even with both parents working,

there seems to be less money than before.

That is because many parents feel the need to provide each child with:

- his/her own bedroom
- clothes
- toys

and then, as they grow older:

- his/her own TV and entertainment system
- mobile phone
- computer
- motor vehicle.

In the past,

when several children shared a bedroom,

and also shared clothes and toys,

children learned exactly that:

how to share,

how to take turns,

how to wait,

and even how to 'go without'.

A vocation to the priesthood or religious life

requires that a person know how to share with others,

in the seminary or religious house, and in the parish,

how to take turns and let others go first in life,

how to wait for permission to do things,

and how to 'go without' material things or permission.

Even when some young men and women today  
decide to try out the seminary or the convent or monastery,  
we are finding that it is very difficult for them to adapt,  
and some of them leave in a very short time.

They are not used to living in a group,  
with all the give-and-take that is involved in that dynamic.

Therefore,  
if Catholic parents want to nurture vocations,  
they have to conduct their family life like a seminary,  
which really is not much different  
from the way family life was lived not so long ago.

That is,  
resist the urge to give in to a child's demands all the time,  
resist the urge to provide a child with many individual possessions,  
resist the urge to allow a child so much privacy and free time  
that the home becomes little more than a hotel.

This will result in a lessening of the need to have so much,  
and when a child learns to live without everything money can buy,  
it is not such a huge decision to embrace the Gospel life.

Someone mentioned to me yesterday  
that when a boy or girl left home in the past  
to enter the seminary or convent or monastery,  
it was often a step up in lifestyle.

That is,  
the candidate often ate better,  
had a private room,  
received a small allowance for spending money,  
and even had access to a television –  
all things that he/she may not have had at home.

But now,  
when someone leaves home to go to the seminary or convent,  
it can be shock to the system.

Two of our seminarians visited me last night,  
and they both said that they have probably lost weight  
in the past two weeks.

They don't have TVs in their bedrooms,  
and, most of the time, they have to do things with others.

Catholic parents should pray for vocations, certainly;  
but they must do more,  
if they ever hope to produce a priest or religious from their home.

And I think the reflections I have provided today  
would help all children to grow up to be the kind of people  
that would become good spouses and good parents.

Because, as I said at the start,  
the real crisis is not a lack of vocations to priesthood & religious life;  
the real crisis is an inability of young adults today  
to, first of all, commit themselves to marriage; and then,  
to live selflessly and generously as spouses and parents.

A good priest or sister  
must have the same abilities and characteristics  
of a good husband or wife, a good mother or father.

And a good married person or parent  
should also be able to be a good priest or religious.

There is no such thing as two completely different types of people  
for two completely different types of vocation.

After all,  
that's why we call priests 'Father'  
and religious are called 'Sister' or 'Brother'  
or even 'Reverend Mother' –  
it's all about family,  
and the family, the seedplot of vocations,  
is where not only vocations, but the Church itself,  
is born, nurtured, and sent forth into the world.