



The Catholic Weekly

Marriage, family a 'glimpse' of our bond with God

A conversation with Chris Meney, director of the Office of Marriage and Family

By Damir Govorcin

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Marriage and family give us a glimpse of what it is like to be in relationship with God, says Chris Meney, director of the Office of Marriage and Family in the Sydney archdiocese.

"It's because it's life-giving, it's fruitful, it's a loving relationship, it's dynamic, and it's enduring," said the 49-year-old father of nine.

"And they are the things we have in our relationship with God.

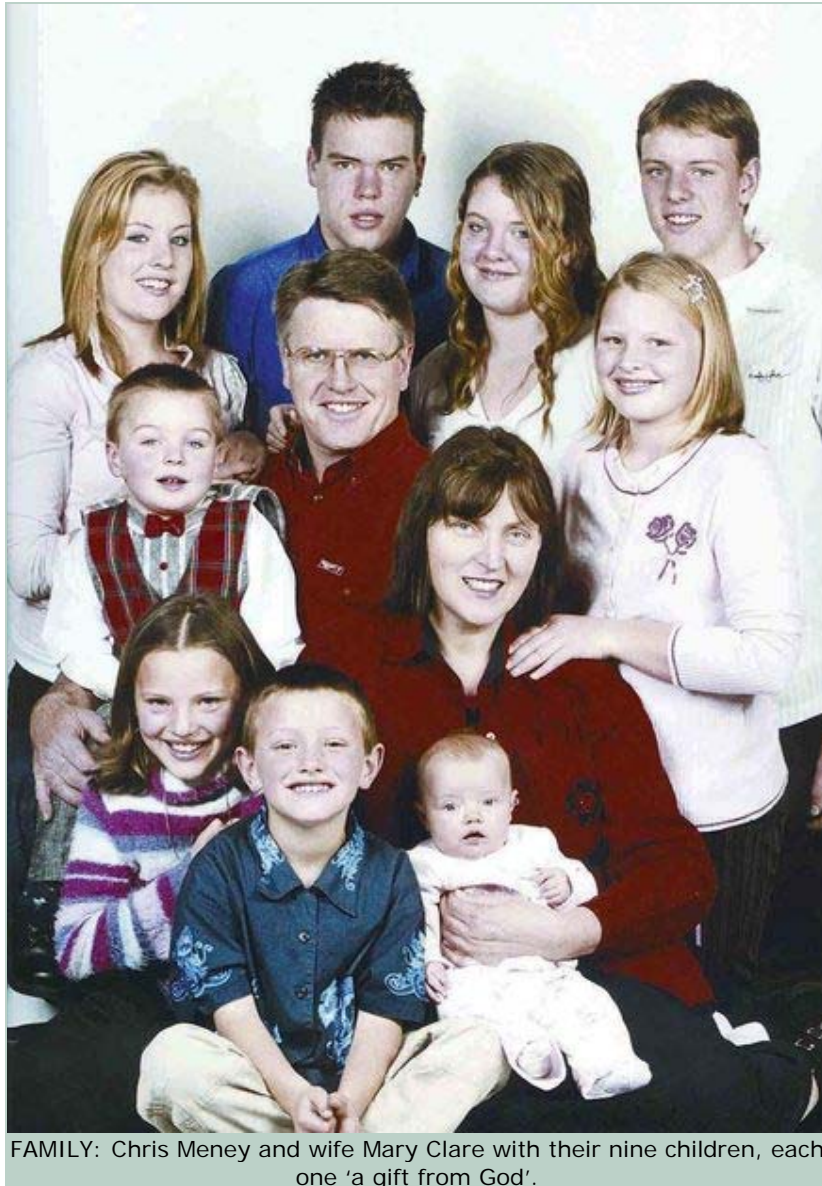
"Through the image of marriage and family we get this snapshot glimpse of what it is like.

"It's an imperfect one and it has its difficulties, but it also has a richness and authenticity that is really uplifting for us.

"It gives us an appreciation of the value of Christian hope."

He added: "The Church's teachings on marriage and family are really wonderful.

"They aren't just rules and regulations. It is a wonderful tapestry people are called to look at and try to understand and appreciate the real truth and beauty of it.



FAMILY: Chris Meney and wife Mary Clare with their nine children, each one 'a gift from God'.

"And while sometimes there can be real challenges with people living out that truth, it is just a reflection of the wonderful mystery that is a part of the way God has made us and the way he has called us to be in relationship with him."

The Office for Marriage and Family, which opened last month, will play a leading role in supporting

priests, parishes, agencies and schools in proclaiming the Church's teaching about the great gifts of marriage and family life.

A key focus of its work will be formation in the area of family and marriage, and encouraging families to play their part in evangelisation.

"Christian marriage and family is a wonderful gift, and my brief is to try and project the wonder, truth, goodness and beauty of that gift, to show how wonderfully enriching it is for both individuals and for spouses, and also for the culture itself," Chris says.

"Marriage has a wonderful uplifting effect on a culture. It provides an environment where we socialise our young, where we pass on values, where we show them the true meaning of commitment and staying the course, and showing that while life has its trials and tribulations there is an inherent value in really hanging on to those things which are authentic.

"And so part of my brief is to try to get that message out into the culture to look at things like the gift of children, the concept of fatherhood and the value that mothers have within the society."

The Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, welcomed Chris' appointment and said he would make an "invaluable contribution to strengthening marriage and family work in the archdiocese".

"We have a number of agencies working to support different areas of family life in practical ways, and providing marriage preparation," the cardinal said.

"Agencies, schools and parishes are also involved in supporting family life and in providing information about what marriage and family entails.

"This new office will work with these groups and help defend and explain the Christian understanding of marriage and family both to the Church community and wider society."

Despite the increased rates of divorce and family breakdowns, Chris believes that marriage is something that is still "achievable and has a deep and profound beauty".

"I think cultural change is always a challenge," he said.

"I know that there are many things happening within that culture that are undesirable by any objective criteria.

"I don't think that anybody ever gets married with the intention of getting divorced, or any person becomes a parent with the intention of being a single parent.

"What we need to do is look for ways in which we can encourage people to see that it is a really livable vocation."

He added: "We are coming out of an age in western culture and in Australia, in particular, where we think that absolute freedom is going to give us the happiness we want.

"Freedom to do whatever we like, whenever we like really isn't bringing people happiness and we have probably seen the explosion of that concept since the 1960s.

"But we have had a massive unravelling of many of the things within the culture that people see as valuable.

"So I think people are really searching now for authenticity, searching for something which is really true, good and beautiful."

Chris says that as a society "we are too self-focused, but necessarily too selfish".

"If you look at people, often they are concerned about how they look and what others think of them," he said.

"However, there are many people who are extremely generous and give of their time to do wonderful

work for others.

"That's a sign that there's a generosity of spirit, a real goodness within people.

"But being self-focused and worried about how we are going through our life can be a bit distracting in what we are about as persons.

"I think we should be conscious of what we are as an individual, but the natural calling of a human person is to be in a relationship with others.

"We should be out there trying to engage with people in a way in which is fulfilling for us as a person and one of the ways we do that is through marriage."

Financial pressures place a great strain on a family unit with mothers and fathers spending more time out of the home trying to earn enough money to provide for their children. But Chris says that brings its own pressures.

"To say that having mothers and fathers away from their children for large amounts of time is a good thing flies in the face of everything we know about raising children," he said.

"We know that they are a pivotal significance in the lives of their children, and when those economic pressures come to bear it does make life rather difficult.

"There are many things that are imposing for young couples when they are looking to get married.

"They may have sizable mortgages that they will need to undertake, they may have HECS debts that they have accrued through higher education, they may have compulsory superannuation they have to contribute to and there's also a high cost of living in some capital cities.

"All these things weigh heavily on the mind of young people, but, despite all that, the value that marriage and family offers to people is such a rich and wonderful gift.

"I encourage young couples to look for ways in which they can get married by putting themselves in a situation geographically which might require moving outside of Sydney.

"Maybe they can move to a less expensive area and at the same time look to build a family quite early, not to put off having children for many years.