

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Prayer and Family Life

DEAR EDITOR:

I would like to offer a few comments on the article on 'Prayer and Family Life' by E.M.G.B. which appeared in the last October issue. Perhaps the quality that most recommends this article is the stress placed upon the individuality of such autobiographical sketches. Because of the social upheavals our age is witnessing, the lay vocation has become something of an object of discussion—a discussion which is not always very enlightening, for at the practical level, the comforting lucidity of theological certainty becomes obscured in the unstable flux of contingency, and we must turn from the fallibility of our own judgments to a confident reliance upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And herein lies the value of such self-revealing articles. The importance of a glimpse into the struggles another has had in meeting the same problems that we ourselves face lies not so much in the model it may provide for us as in the security we gain by the assurance that we do not walk the way alone. Ultimately, the practical exigencies of the twentieth-century married vocation will perhaps best be gleaned from the mosaic tableau of divine wisdom working through the affairs of men presented by just such autobiographical articles.

We also have a growing family—five children aged six and under. Writing as the *paterfamilias*, E.M.G.B. discusses the quite normal and just financial anxieties experienced by the father of a rapidly expanding family, and the manner in which this concern can itself lead to sanctity is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated. That perfect trust that God will care for us even as he cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field can be difficult to balance against the just concern felt by the one who must provide for the family which is his God-given responsibility. It happened to me once, in a time of financial crisis, that as I was praying that some of our burdens would be relaxed, so that the pressure on my husband would not be so great, a doubt came over me, that perhaps instead of relief, I should ask God to give him greater trust in his providence. But almost before it was born, the doubt

was stilled, and I understood very clearly that God himself had given it to me to pray for an end to the difficulties that concerned my husband, and that he would give relief for them. And after that, whenever I was sad at seeing him burdened with our difficulties, and tempted to the anxiety which gives rise to that preoccupied impatience which is so destructive of family harmony, the promise I had been given was the only thread of security, giving me to understand that if only I would cling to the certainty of that promise, all would be well—but not before the virtue of hope had been most abundantly increased in us.

E.M.G.B. also mentions the difficulties that can attend the proper use of the marriage act, and here again, this must be seen as a means given by God to married people to greater union with each other in him. There have been times during the marriage act when Christ has presented himself to me in the guise of my husband, and himself given me to understand that my efforts to give pleasure had also given him pleasure, and that a love born entirely of love for him could not but unite us with him, in uniting us with each other.

We are also both converts, as are E.M.G.B. and his wife, so that we have had to build up our own family customs—although I don't think this is a problem peculiar to converts today. 'Religion at home' is coming increasingly to extend, beyond the family recitation of the rosary or other prayers, to a more formal study of dogmatic truth, for both adults and children. And it is here that the diverse levels of understanding may tend to pull apart, so that it is difficult to find a programme which appeals to both adults and children of many different ages. I suppose we are extra lucky in having a papa who has never really grown up himself, and still enjoys such things as folk music and folk dances (even accompanied by the unskilled clumsiness of small children), and all of us like the out-of-doors. Building, therefore, upon activities that all of us enjoy, we have managed, with the assistance of such books as Maria Augusta Trapp's *Around the Year with the Trapp Family*, Mary Reed Newland's *The Year and Our Children*, and Helen McLoughlin's pamphlets on *Family Customs* (published by the Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.), to put truth into the language of song and dance—even of picnics. Every fall, for instance, we celebrate the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, with a 'tabernacle' built of the branches from the fall tree pruning.

After our tabernacle has provided shelter for a picnic, during which we discuss the meaning of the feast, it is burnt in a big bonfire—even the fall yard-cleaning can receive a liturgical twist! This sort of thing is fun for all of us, and with a little thought, we have found it possible to vest a great many events, which would be part of our life anyhow, in liturgical garb.

These various family activities are drawn together, related to the unified body of truth from which they flow, and interpreted at the level of each child both by the discussions they naturally provoke and, more systematically, by reading. I suppose this latter has fallen my task, at least as regards the element of systematization, because I am most constantly with the children. This is another area where we must keep in mind the fact that the spirituality we communicate to our children must be an overflow of our own. Our children are, both physically and spiritually, the expression of their parents' love for God, and for each other in God. The books parents read to their children, therefore, will express their own reading preferences. And since my own reading is restricted almost exclusively to the Bible, the liturgy of the Church, and St Thomas, our children's library is built primarily around a little core of Bible books, those by Piet Worm, of which there are now three, *Stories from the Old Testament*, *More Stories from the Old Testament*, and *Stories from the New Testament*—these can be read 'as is', and our children have enjoyed them from the age of three—and the *Golden Old and New Testaments*—these have excellent pictures, but the stories are a little long, so we usually shorten and paraphrase them. We read these regularly, more or less according to the order in which the books of the Bible appear in the divine office. There is nothing rigid about this little plan, of course, but it does help small children learn and pray with the Church.

If we are careful to maintain sufficient flexibility, the liturgical year can thus provide a presentation of the basic truths of the faith, which can be worked into the pattern of family life, and assimilated by each member of the family in terms of his own spiritual needs. The rosary, recited sometimes in common, sometimes individually in our family, takes its place within this framework as the liturgical year in miniature, providing a daily panorama of the mysteries of our redemption.

But, of course, the prayer of prayers, the source from which all

other prayers draw their efficacy, always remains the holy sacrifice of the mass. Here all is drawn into one. The liturgical year is but the manifold expression of the unique mystery of our redemption by the sacrifice of Christ—the sacrifice consummated on Calvary, repeated daily on the altar, and fulfilled in us by our union with this eucharistic sacrifice. It is here that our efforts bear fruit, and that we draw, each according to his needs, the nourishment we need not only to carry our own cross, but even to bear one another's burdens—for we who are one flesh in the bonds of matrimony are yet more intimately one in the body and blood of Christ, and sometimes God allows our own soul to be the battleground of temptation, to spare one that we love.

Thus drawn into some participation of the ineffable unity of God himself, we are sometimes given even to see each other in God, so that God himself becomes as the medium of our knowledge of each other. At rest in the dark luminescence of the very plenitude of truth itself, all restless striving is stilled, and our minds are somehow quietly content to seek nothing, but remain in the tranquil certainty that God will always reveal to us all that we need to know. The cares of a busy routine no longer turn our minds from God, and the confused multiplicity of constant problems depends for its solution, not upon the dark uncertainty of our own judgment, but upon a strength drawn from the depths of divine wisdom itself. At mass, the presence of small children no longer distracts our own devotion, but seems almost to become part of it, so that our attention to their needs seems to be simply another facet of our attention to the sacrifice being offered on the altar.

It is in this fashion that Christ our head draws all things to himself. United as members of one family, we share a more profound unity as members of one Christ, and our family unity thus draws its sustenance from the unfathomable depths of God's own oneness.

In Christ,
J.F.