

Meeting Summaries and Questions for **Nurturing Faith and Family**

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1. Faith in the Family – Often we feel that we will never reach the ideal family, that postcard image in which father actually does know best and the kids listen to him! Yet no matter how imperfect, it is important to remember that our families are holy, for they are gifts of God. They are also central to our personal well-being and to our future. As Pope John Paul II stated, "As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live." In other words, as maddening as families can sometimes be, they deserve our greatest attention. While we may never reach the ideal, we must acknowledge the powerful role we as men have in shaping our families. If men take a positive, active role in leading their families—from prayer and church attendance to fun and games to community involvement—our families will thrive.

Questions – As central as your family is to you, your faith group may not know much about your family situation. Take a few minutes to describe your immediate and extended family, and ask for prayers as they are needed. Next, share your image of the ideal family? How much does your immediate or extended family reflect this ideal? What role can you play to change family dynamics, including your family faith life, for the better? Do you believe that families are under significant stress? In what ways? Discuss tools that you have tried in your own home, or heard about others using, to bring the family both closer together and into a deeper relationship with God.

2. Family in Scripture – The story of Joseph is a classic case of a father trying to do God's will in the face of enormous pressures. Does he get a hearty pat on the back for his effort? Not so much. He likely had fond hopes for his young family: a simple life with a lovely wife and, if God willed it, children to be his lasting legacy. Well, things didn't go quite as planned. They rarely do. After hearing shocking news that his fiancée was with child, Joseph did as the Lord instructed and took his bride to Nazareth, and then into Egypt to save his family. And then we hardly hear from him again. Doesn't seem fair, does it? But it does seem right. And that, precisely, is the point. Leading a family is never easy, but it *is* about doing the right thing. We can only ask for God's guidance to do what is right and then let our legacy, our family, be our just reward.

Questions – "So, how's the family?" We are asked this question many times a month. Often, the answer is "fine." Rarely, however, are we asked about the spiritual life of the family. Now's your chance. Discuss the role that God and church actually do, and potentially could, play in family life. Now discuss stories of family in Scripture, from Abraham and his son to Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son. These are stories about the strain and holiness of family life. Do you see your own family in any of these stories? If you were to create a parable of your own family, how would it go – would they be in the desert or the mountaintop, lost or found, growing on fertile soil or sand or rock?

3. Faith in Our Children – Children reveal how God must feel about us. As any parent knows, our children can be stubborn, joyful, gracious, and horrid—sometimes all within the same hour. And we, in turn, will change our feelings during that same hour. How, then, are we to lead with any consistency? Jesus suggests an answer. He singles out children to approach him freely and he reminds his adult followers to be more like them, "for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mk 10:14). In other words, we need to let children be children so that they can live out God's grace in the world, and so that we might learn from them. At the same time, just as Christ serves as a spiritual and moral center in our lives, so we must be for our children. They seek stability, constancy, and surety in us, just as we seek these in God. Treating our children as God treats his own is a tall order, particularly when they are screaming on the floor, or screaming down the block in our car. Yet we really have no choice. They are ours, forever, and we are blessed in our obligation to help them grow and thrive.

Questions – Spend some time talking about the kids. Yes, it's important—not just for you, but also for the other members to hear. Share how having children (or not having them) has changed your outlook on life. Discuss how they have affected your relationship with God. Have they brought you closer? Can you empathize with the joys and the frustrations that God has with his children, including you?

4. Faith in Our Partners - God scooped up the earth, blew the breath of life on it, and created Adam, the first

human. Most people assume Adam is a male and that “Adam” is a proper name. Actually, “Adam” is an English transliteration for the Hebrew *ha adama* that, in turn, is play on the word for the earth, *ha adamah*. So, *ha adam* means simply “a creature made from the earth.” In fact, there is nothing in the Hebrew to suggest that this creature possesses any gender, male or female. Only after two separate beings were created, is Adam finally referred to as a man, *ish*, and the second being as a woman, *ishah*. The implications are profound— we are made truly complete only through our relationship with another. No wonder we call our partners our “better halves.” Now recall your own courtship—your coming to completion through relationship with another. It is the power of love to draw us into relationship and it is a power to be honored and nourished, because it comes from God. We will praise God by fully by celebrating this holy gift.

Questions – Most people would not see a connection between religion and romance. Yet God gave us romance for a reason—to draw us into relationship with another and, thus, to the Holy Spirit, who thrives on relationships. The story of how you met your partner can be both funny and poignant. Take a moment to share one of the most important stories in your life—how you met your life partner. When reflecting on how you met, identify what first attracted you to her - her energy, compassion, humor or spirit. Then, be bold – plan a group outing with your ‘life partners’ with dinner and, yes, flowers. Your returns will be many-fold.

5. Supporting Your Family’s Gifts – Some days, when we look at our families, it seems incredible that we could be related, much less bound to each other for life. The trick is to appreciate the diversity within our own family and celebrate it. Just as Paul recognizes that we have different talents, so we can learn to see and cherish these talents in our family members—even when that talent seems to be for losing things, or being late. One of our earliest advocates for the notion of self-empowerment was Jesus. Christ does not want people to hide our gifts under a bushel. For to deny the light or suppress it under a mountain of outside expectations, would be to turn our backs on God’s gift. One of our responsibilities in the family is to help our partners and children realize their particular gifts. In this sense, we are family gardeners who must understand that each family member needs a distinct amount of care and nourishment, such as full sun or partial shade, in order to grow. One approach does not fit all. The harvest, of course, is our family and, ultimately, our legacy.

Questions – Take time to go through each member of your immediate family and identify his or her core gifts. Are these gifts being nurtured in your home? What might you do, as a family leader, to help ensure that these gifts are realized? If you could give each member of your family a spiritual, emotional, or mental gift, what would that be? The gift of courage, of grace, of trust in oneself and in God? As you discuss these items, consider the power you have in the family to make these gifts a reality in your home.

6. Faith in Our Fathers - A man’s relationship with his father is complex, to say the least. We may be bound by love, anger, frustration, and longing—all mixed together. In fact, this relationship can seem more complex, and more dynamic, than our relationship with God the Father. Why is this so? And what can we learn from each that may be applied to the other? The relationship with our birth father is personal and immediate, even if he has been absent for a long time. We would do well to nurture such intimacy with God. On the other hand, the relationship is often so intense that it can become fixed in time. Yet, people change. As a result, the dynamics of our relationships should change as well. What if our relationship with God the Father was the same as when we were six, or ten, or fifteen? Our faith would be constrained, even immature. In this session, take time to honor our fathers by trying to see them as they are, not who they were or how we want or remember them to be. We honor God the Father as well by reaching out to him as one would a human father. If we allow it, our earthly and heavenly fathers mutually reinforce the deeply personal stake we have, or should have, in both.

Questions – In what way do you feel you are like your father? In what ways have you tried to be different—in your attitude and in your family relationships? Presumably your relationship with God has evolved over time. Compare the relationship you had with God the Father as a child with the one you have now as an adult. What has been gained (appreciation, trust, understanding)? What has been lost (intimacy, trust, wonder)? Discuss how you might take the best of both and fashion a closer relationship with God the Father.

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