

LENTEN NOVENA 2026 – THE FAMILY OF GOD

HOLY REDEEMER PARISH – BERGVLIET, CAPE TOWN

THE VOCATION OF THE FAMILY

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Father Gerard described his introductory sermon of our Lenten Novena last week as being the pilot episode and so tonight we move into the first of the central episodes and look at the theme of the Vocation of the Family.

It's important firstly by getting clear in our minds just what we mean by **vocation**. This is because so often Christians, but especially Catholics, when we hear the word 'vocation', we immediately think of nuns, monks, sisters, brothers or priests. Those are specific vocations but vocation is itself much bigger. The clue is in the very word - it means a calling from God. And everybody is called to respond to God's love and live that love out for others.

All of us are called in different ways, but we are all called to live out the love of God which is present within our hearts and to make that love present in the world. Each of us, in our own way, live out the Christian life in a way that speaks to others. Our lives are living Gospels.

For me, there's a wonderful musical analogy. I always have to preface this analogy but saying that, if you want to try this out for yourself – and I hope you do - please make sure there's nobody around watching you unless they're sympathetic and know what you're up to. Otherwise somebody may phone the hospital up and get you carted away. You'll understand why as I explain.

It's a little experiment. You need a piano, a genuine acoustic piano with strings. Maybe you've got one at home. Perhaps you have a friend who has a piano. The confirmation class who are with us tonight are welcome to try it out on the piano in the hall afterwards. Don't worry, it will do no damage.

What you need to do is to first take the stuff off the top of the piano. If it's a musician's piano, the top will be covered with music. That's perfect. That's very good. That's what it's for. Any other piano most likely has got flowers in pots and photographs. Those pianos are the world's most expensive photograph shelves. Take them off. You'll be doing them a favour because no water will go down inside the piano when you water the flowers and destroy it.

Once you have everything off the top of the piano, lift up the top lid. Put your foot on the right hand pedal and sing a note into the back of the piano just like this. Just like this – 'Lah"! That's why I say make sure nobody's watching. If they see you singing into the back of a piano they might get worried about your sanity.

Listen carefully to what happens when you stop singing. The sound that you were making continues on the inside of the piano. It's not an echo. A piano isn't big enough to have an echo in it. What is happening is - there's a fancy scientific name for it (sympathetic vibration), but that doesn't matter – that whatever strings in the piano have the note you were singing in them, or partials of that note, are set in motion. Sound is energy and the energy of your singing starts those sympathetic strings vibrating as well. And when you stop, they carry on vibrating.

I think vocation is a little bit like this.

God created each of us as an individual gift to ourselves, each with our own gifts, talents, those things within us that bring life, and areas for growth, those things within us – weaknesses – which remind us that we need God and that need a bit of redemption. But they're all part of the mix of who we are. And God calls. It's as though he sings into the centre of our being and something within us starts to respond.

And the more awake we are, the more we are tuned into God as it were, the more we listen to the sound that is within us, and the more we're able to tune ourselves in and become that song that he has sung into us.

And remember that each vocation is a way of living out the Christian life in a way that makes it visible to other people.

You could think of it in terms of light in a prism. Our school laboratory didn't have a prism for the science lab. But it was no problem because in KwaZulu Natal in summer there is going to be a thunderstorm every day or every second day at least. They seem to roll on actually, day after day in summer. And so the teachers would just say go and look at a rainbow because when light goes through droplets of water and clouds to form a rainbow, the light is split up into those colours.

And in a certain sense, that's exactly what happens. God's light is split through the prism of our hearts, through the prism of vocation into different vocations. But all of them come from the same light and all of them are parts of that original life. And all of them together make that real life that is God.

So all of us are called, each of us in our own way, and each of those different callings, put together, rejoined, make the light of God present in the world.

And if we think about what it means to make God present in the world, what we're actually talking about then is sacraments.

The very first sacrament of course is Jesus Christ himself. When Jesus was born, grew up, talked to customers in his father's carpenter's shop, walked among people in Galilee, God was really present to those people. Jesus, the Incarnate One, was in their midst, touching, being touched, talking, listening. They encountered God. They were encountered by God.

But in his death and resurrection, it was possible through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for God then to be present everywhere through all of time, through the Holy Spirit making his son incarnate once more, but this time in each of the hearts of those who believe. Through faith, through our baptism, we become the means by which Christ continues his presence in the world. And so the Church – the community of believers – is also sacrament.

Each of us in our own way become a sort of a sacrament of Christ. And as the body of Christ, we truly make him present. Not that we own him. It's more that God uses us as a way of being present. As Teresa of Ávila wrote, 'Christ has not hands on earth but yours, yours are his feet ...'

And so out of that comes our seven sacraments. Again, the idea of light flowing through a prism or a raindrop and all the different colours coming. Each sacrament is a different way of encountering God's love. Each one is a way of being embraced, hugged by God.

One of those is marriage and family life and that's why we talk about marriage and family life as being a vocation because it's a way of making God present in the world.

But what particular aspect of God is made present in the world by a family?

Well, quite obviously, it's the fact that is central to our Christian faith: that God is in fact Trinity.

There's different ways of looking at the trinity. We all struggle to come to understand it because it is such a central mystery. But one of the ways I particularly enjoy is the way that Richard of St Victor looks at it because he says to us that humankind should always have realised that God was a Trinity if we're honest about what it means that **God is love**.

Because true perfect love cannot be self-absorbed. It cannot be directed inward. It has to be directed outward. So God had to have someone to love. There needs to be a lover and a beloved. And that one that is loved by God has to be equal to God for it to be a worthy enough love.

And to only love yourself would be totally self-centred and therefore not the perfection of love that God is. So obviously there are two divine persons, the lover and the beloved.

But we all know when there's just two people deeply in love, they can be completely self-absorbed. Just watch any teenagers who have fallen in love for the first time. They can sit together in an enormous crowd, oblivious to what is going on around them - the whole universe could collapse, but they wouldn't notice. All they can see is one another.

And so real love, the deepest of loves, needs to be shared with a third person. And that third person we call the Holy Spirit.

If you look at the family, we have two people deeply in love and their love isn't inward turned. Their love is outward-focussed. It is fruitful and comes forth in the family.

Obviously, we know that there are different forms of families. Some families struggle. Not everyone can have children. But their love, so often, is directed outwards as well as towards each other. In all cases there is the possibility of looking outward and loving other people.

This is the heart of everything.

The family then makes present the self-giving love of God which is the fruit of Christ's presence within them, who has also come into their relationship in the same way that he was invited to the wedding at Cana and became part of that couple's lives as well.

A nun I worked with always used to tease me about the fact that I always name my sources. It's a very traditional Redemptorist thing to tell a story and say that it happened to you or that you thought of it, meanwhile you heard it from one of your brothers. And she said, "You always make a mistake. You always tell people who it was you heard the story from."

I cannot break the habit of a lifetime and I'm going to tell you from whom I got this idea.

One of the advantages - or disadvantages - of being an organist is that you get to hear an awful lot of sermons. And I played for a wedding once that Father Andrew Cox celebrated and in his homily he said something to the young married couple that really struck me and stayed with me. So I've used it ever since.

He looked at the young couple. I won't tell you what their names are. Let's just call them Peter and Jane, for example.

So he said, "Now, Peter's family know that he is the most perfect example of a young man ever born and ever to be born. Anybody falling in love with him is lucky. He is perfect.

"But by this stage, Jane has picked up that there's one or two things that she wishes to tweak. Maybe two or four things she wants to tweak. The way, for example, he never quite gets his socks in the laundry basket and puts empty milk bottles back in the fridge.

"And we know for absolute certain that Jane's family know that there is no better young lady ever to be born or ever born. She is perfect. But I can guarantee you that Peter has one or two little tweaks that he would like to work on. Like the fact that she starts changing her dress around fifteen minutes after they were supposed to leave!

"And yet here they are, giving themselves one to the other."

What are they showing us?

They are showing us in their own human way how God loves us.

God knows our weaknesses. God knows our strengths. But God doesn't wait for us to change. God loves us as we are.

And here is a young couple taking this risk on one another because at its very heart, love is a risk. It's putting your happiness in somebody else's hands. God took a risk on us,

creating us and sending his Son to die for us. God just loves, holds his hands out to us, but always leaves us free to respond to that love. God never asks us to change before he is prepared to love us. In fact, he loved us before we ever were ... 'Before you were knit together in your mother's womb, I knew you.' [Ps 139]

In this way, families always mediate God's love. The love in a family is other centred. Never perfect, but still it's other centred. Families are the places where we learn to die to ourselves and put other people first. They're where we learn to live with others who think differently to us. Families teach us to love others in the way that God loves – I love the sister, the brother, the mother, the father that I have, as they are, not the way we would want them to be. And, if we're honest, we realise that they're putting up with a lot to love us in return. This brings us to honesty, humility and true love.

So in a very real sense then, in and among families, the gospel message is always resounding. Our very lives are a gospel, a lived gospel.

There are no such things as perfect families. The very struggles we have as families to stay together, the times when families are pushed to the point where they do have to separate, all of these things speak of love in different ways, that we learn to put up with one another and that we are loved as we are even in our imperfections by God.

That is the greatest gospel we can speak to anybody and it's the truest gospel because it isn't words. It's light, the light of God shining out into the world through us.