

'It's complicated' – our experience of family affects our faith life

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

Recently my book club discussed *The Dutch House* by Ann Patchett. It spans five decades in the lives of two siblings, Danny and Maeve Conroy. You could call it a dysfunctional family story about an affluent, white brother and sister who try to figure out what happened to them during childhood. They had a birth mother who deserted the family and a stepmother who threw them out when Cyril, their somewhat emotionally distant father, died suddenly.

May and June find us celebrating Mother's Day and Father's Day. For many people, these days are times of joy and gratitude. But for others, memories of family life are more complicated and sometimes very painful. Were families in Jesus' day more successful than modern families are? We don't get many hints about wounds from family of origin experiences in our Gospels — perhaps only in the relationships of the two brothers and the father in the prodigal son story. Jesus of the first century, and the writers of New Testament, lacked our psychological categories and language to talk about these things.

One thing Jesus did talk about frequently was the heart. For example, "... it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come — sexual immorality, theft, murder (Mk 7:21), or Luke's version — "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart (Lk 6:45)." We get a hint here that Jesus is interested not only in what we do, our bad actions, but in why we do them — what leads us to sin, what is in our hearts. As Christian moral principles developed, the early Church also pondered sources of our sins, which it named "capital sins" — lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride. The great St. Augustine (d. 430 CE) is famous for his introspection about the motivations which caused him to sin. Unfortunately, several centuries after that, confessional theology became dominated by practices of Irish monks; they developed elaborate lists of sins with appropriate penances attached. To this day many people who confess focus on only on sinful actions rather than what is in the heart.

Psychological insights are a gift for us today in our "Journey Toward Holiness." We can use them throughout our life to look inside ourselves and discover what is prompting us to act as we do. The many things that happen to us as we grow up in families can be a fruitful source of this reflection.

Sometimes very serious things happen in families, but sometimes the things that deeply affect us can be slight. Some people are able to move through huge calamities and the effects on them, things like

sexual abuse, sudden death of parents, addictions, infidelity, marital conflicts, poverty ... other people get stopped in their human and spiritual development by what seems rather trivial in comparison — lack of parental affirmation, one sibling getting more attention and benefits from the parents, emotionally distant or distracted parenting, frequent moving from place to place, parental expectations the child cannot meet, too much responsibility for family issues placed on a child, even "too good to be true" parents in whose shadow the child must forever live ...

As we become conscious of our family of origin experiences, acceptance is needed. We need to accept that our experience is not wrong but is simply our own unique experience. And our experience need not be the same as that of other family members who may have a different memory or "take" on what happened. It's my memory and interpretation of events that has affected me, and that is what I need to deal with. Some things that happened to us in our families were unintentional. But some may seem intentional, and they especially can get us stuck in an unending rehashing of events and everlasting anger and resentment.

Spiritual writers with both psychological and theological backgrounds, like Thomas Moore and Ronald Rolheiser, caution that our family of origin experiences, if not brought to consciousness, can damage how we relate to others. Trust issues, communication problems, resentment and anger are some behaviors often connected with family of origin experiences. A little example in my life is that when I became a boss, I was sometimes overly critical and not very affirming of staff. As I reflected on my behavior, I realized I was repeating the pattern of our parents, and that consciousness continues to help me act differently to this day. Sometimes we may need professional help as we explore family experiences. Or this consciousness can simply become a fruitful part of our prayer life, and something we might share with a spiritual advisor. Above all, reflecting on my personal family experience opens my heart to the Lord and His healing grace. Then I am better able to bring good things out in my words and actions from what is stored in my heart (Lk 6:45).

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