posts by Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S.

“Angels to the Aid of Family” (10/3/14)
“Communication as Visitation” (1/30/15)
“Faith, Family, and the Future” (5/15/15)
Angels to the aid of Family (10-3-14)

As is tradition, the theme for World Communications Day was made known on the feast of the archangels (September 29). With the mighty ministrations of heavenly messengers, the theme appears to have a celestial character while it focuses on a profound human reality.

Today, that theme – “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love” – stands at the forefront of the Church’s work. Concern for marriage and family life is the subject of the pontifical message (to be published on January 24, 2015), the focus of a worldwide meeting (to be celebrated in Philadelphia on September 22-27, 2015), and the pastoral topic of two Synods of Bishops, the first of which begins in Rome this weekend. How might the archangels play a role in these earthly endeavors?

MICHAEL is the warrior, known for his victory in the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. It may not be a sign of the end times, but the status of marriage and the family today certainly has epochal dimensions. In a vocation that calls forth lifelong commitment and an institution that forms the foundation of society, an angelic power with the name “who is like God” can assist in the current struggles. With clashing ecclesial positions described as “gospel” or “hope” or “truth” making news, and scholarly arguments being published in consideration or assessment of the issues, the dialogue is heating up. It stands in need of divine inspiration that we might get it right – not as a matter of institutional force or public preference, but in terms of a right understanding of God’s will.

GABRIEL is the bearer of Good News, known especially for the Annunciation to Mary about the conception and birth of Jesus. Whatever the disputes about it, marriage remains good news for all. Pope Francis signaled this in remarks to the Cardinals: “We are called to acknowledge how beautiful, true, and good it is to start a family, to be a family today; and how indispensable the family is for the life of the world and for the future of humanity.” The catechesis for the World Meeting 2015 proclaims it: “Love is our mission, and it is by loving God and one another that we will be fully alive” (Archbishop Chaput). Divine inspiration from the angel named “God is my strength” will help to keep the proper perspective on announcing the good that marriage is and family does.

RAPHAEL is the guide, known for aiding and accompanying Tobit. On the journey that is marriage, and in our thinking about marriage, the challenges are growing. Poverty and welfare, violence and abuse, lower birth rates, higher divorce rates … these and other troubles abound. Legislative definitions and judicial decisions raise fundamental questions about the future. Now as always, marriage and family life stand in need of compassionate care and of faithful companionship along the way. From an angel whose name recalls how “God heals,” we move forward in hope. And to accompany this work, we should pray, as Pope Francis bids us:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love, to you we turn with trust.
Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches.
Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division: may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.
Holy Family of Nazareth, may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God’s plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer.
**Communication as Visitation (1-30-15)**

Pope Francis’ annual Message for World Communications Day was published last week on the feast of St. Francis de Sales. Its focus – “Communicating the Family: A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love” – fits right in with the upcoming World Meeting in Philadelphia and the next Synod of Bishops in Rome.

As brief and straight-forward as it is, it’s hard to believe the message is already being misinterpreted! Case in point: an article from CRUX, picked up by CBS News, that claims in its title and its lead that “Pope Francis is urging families to put aside their iPhones and Twitter feeds and learn to talk to one another again.” The pope acknowledges multiple ways in which modern media can be problematic, but nowhere in the message does he make any such recommendation!

What he does offer is a meditative look at the roots of any/all communication in family life. Urging better communications within the family and positive communications about the family, the Holy Father inspires the world by lifting up the biblical Visitation as an icon for all communication.

In their intervention at the presentation of the pope’s message, professors Chiara Giaccardi and Mauro Magatti elaborated on this iconic representation. Two insights from their erudite analysis are worth repeating.

The first concerns the purpose of communications. “To communicate proximity with proximity, that is together the medium and the message.” As the professors explained, Mary’s arising and going in haste to Elizabeth’s town demonstrates that “to go to find, to be near, to offer the simple gift of one’s own presence and one’s own time – these are the first messages of authentic communication.” The pope’s message expands on this: “To ‘visit’ is to open doors, not remaining closed in our little world, but rather going out to others. So too the family comes alive as it reaches beyond itself; families who do so communicate their message of life and communion, giving comfort and hope to more fragile families, and thus build up the Church herself, which is the family of families.”

The second insight emphasizes the means. “The joy of encounter,” said the professors, “is the frame and the premise of every authentic communication.” Having been visited herself at the Annunciation, Mary seeks to share that with Elizabeth, and with dancing in the womb their exultant dialogue takes place. The joy, in and between persons, that emanates from encountering one another leads to these words from Pope Francis about modern media: “By growing daily in our awareness of the vital importance of encountering others, these ‘new possibilities’, we will employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it.” Digital connections certainly do help (or, when isolating, they can hinder). But in the end it’s the personal encounter that matters most.

Throughout 2015 countless words will be spoken, written, and shared about the Family. A great place to start this vitally important conversation is by reading the pope’s words for yourself.
Faith, Family, and the Future  
(5-15-15)

The lede looms large, signaling a grim future for faith: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center.”

The facts and figures point to distressing trends in the new religious landscape:

- “Catholics appear to be declining both as a percentage of the population and in absolute numbers.”
- Those religiously unaffiliated (the “nones”) are “more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants.”
- And “within Christianity the greatest net losses [through religious switching], by far, have been experienced by Catholics.”

All this confirms Prof. Christian Smith’s research on emerging adults: American Catholicism is faltering.

For we who are clergy, this news should be troubling. The fate of the next generation’s faith must become a higher priority on the Church’s social agenda. Now, between Ascension and Pentecost, would be a good time to seek renewal in the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom to see the truth in the trends; understanding to be able to communicate better; counsel to appreciate the sense of the faithful; fortitude to counteract cultural confusion; knowledge to grasp what really leads people astray; piety that inspires the young by looking forward; and fear of the Lord … to realize that the future of the Church is at stake.

Yes, the institutional church must do more. But the foundation of faith is set at home. Parents, not priests, are Catholicism’s primary teachers. Their work may not guarantee their child’s believing or belonging in later years, but without parental example and instruction and support, the prospects become unfavorable.

The upcoming World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia will showcase this truth. The lineup of speakers, and the schedule of activities, provide ample opportunity to learn and to celebrate. How good it would be if parents (and future parents) participated, and learned more about their essential role in handing on the faith.

World Communications Day, which is celebrated this Sunday (5/17/15), also highlights the importance of home-grown faith. Pope Francis signals it in the pictured theme of his message, which is well worth the brief read.

The pope’s concluding sentiments could serve well as the rallying cry for revitalizing the religious landscape: “Families at their best actively communicate by their witness the beauty and the richness of the relationship between man and woman, and between parents and children. We are not fighting to defend the past. Rather, with patience and trust, we are working to build a better future for the world in which we live.”

That future depends on the family. So does our faith. As always, the landscape is ours to shape.

featured image from www.pewforum.org