

Families

Messengers of the Compassionate Love of Christ

Compassion is a deep expression of love

Each spring, the Catholic Organization for Life and Family reflects on certain aspects of family life. This year, we have chosen to look at solidarity between families, with a special focus on single-parent families,¹ who are both the object and source of solidarity. Through the example of Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our loneliness and re clothed it with his Presence, our families are called to remain near to, compassionate towards and in solidarity with families that are struggling in some way.

Compassion is a deep expression of love. It involves understanding another's suffering and being present in a tangible way through countless thoughtful gestures that say, "I am here, our family is with you, I would like to share your burden." In a real way, compassion is a kind of communication that is wrapped in hope. While compassion is often expressed by an individual, it can also come from the entire family.

**Nothing is more stable or
more changeable than a family**

It is wonderful to be part of a family, to grow up in an environment that bubbles over with vitality, where



relationships with others bring life – and sometimes, we must admit, great challenges. Family life can be extraordinarily rich in communion and solidarity. But it can also be an arena of conflict and a place where challenges must be overcome.

As the twenty-first century begins, we recognize that family circumstances have become more and more complex and diverse. Although most couples decide at some point to get married and have children, it is a fact that these marriages happen later, are more fragile and are more at risk of breakdown. Many adults as well as children are in precarious situations.²

It appears that, increasingly, children are living with a single parent or with step-parents. In 2001, out of 1.07 million Canadian children, *“19% of children did not live with both parents. A majority of children lived with one parent only, most often with their mother.”* A very small percentage, about 1 per cent, didn’t live with either parent. Most of these lived with relatives.³

Becoming a single-parent family usually means, for the primary or sole parent, supporting a shaken, bruised family that has lost its bearings.

It may also mean enduring financial hardship and experiencing emotional fragility. For many families, the entry into single parenthood results in a slide into poverty.⁴

When one spouse breaks the family ties by leaving the marriage, the children are often the first to feel the emotional and material insecurity that follows the break-up. No matter what has caused the couple’s marriage to end, the mother and father will always be parents and should try to work together as parents. Children have a right to know both their parents.



The witness of single-parent families

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) Jesus invites Christian single-parent families to stay faithful to their mission by choosing to love even in the midst of adversity, to change the world slowly, gently, from the inside, like yeast as it leavens dough.

Single-parent families also need the support and encouragement of other families. Only solidarity that grows out of love can overcome long-term adversity. God loves all his children so much! This love is stronger than anything, even death. These families must hear clearly the untiring affirmation, the firm belief, that God deeply loves all human beings.⁵ God is at their side; they live in the very heart of God.

Knowing what it is to be vulnerable, single-parent families may be more sensitive and compassionate towards other families around them who are suffering. Whether they are single parents who are raising children in difficult financial circumstances, people who are isolated, lonely grandparents, couples in crisis, or parents of children who have a physical, psychological or developmental disability, all of these families are called to wrestle with life so that happiness may take root in their home once again.

Solidarity through hospitality from one family to another

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

(Matthew 25:34-36, 40)

Family life is a place where we never stop learning how to love other people – the people who are closest to us – above all else. In our family, whatever its



strengths or weaknesses, we learn about giving, forgiving and looking beyond ourselves to be with others in solidarity. In this natural learning environment, in this *sanctuary of life*, we discover the freedom and mutuality that lead to openness to the other, hospitality, and the creativity we need to reach the other family beyond the isolation and silence that keep them separate. Dwelling places of the breath of God, driven from within by the hope that gives faith in a living God, our families – whether they are deeply united, having difficulties, questioning, or unhappy – can become witnesses of merciful love.

Christian families, whatever their condition, are called to keep growing and maturing and to bear much fruit. (John 15:5) They are faithful to their mission when they create new ways of solidarity and compassion. As a family, a father, a mother, brothers, sisters – together or separately, each according to their talents, through a new “creativity” in charity⁶ – make present the solidarity and compassion of Christ when they welcome

others in difficulty into their world. In the words of Pope John Paul II, *“this is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress.... It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”*⁷ In this way, we as a family can follow in Christ’s footsteps through the simple and concrete actions of our everyday lives as we reach out to families that have been hurt deeply by life.



Families reinvent Christian hospitality in solidarity and compassion in many ways:

- when an older person goes outside to chat with a neighbour who is walking a crying baby
- when a family decides to make room for their neighbour’s son to park his car on their property
- when an older child makes up a game for younger brothers and sisters so their mom or dad can make dinner
- when a mother reaches out to her teenage daughter’s friend who is upset

- when a teenager takes some baking to an older person who lives alone in the apartment downstairs
- when children agree to share a room so relatives who are having a hard time can spend the weekend with them
- when a father and mother take time to have coffee with a friend who is in crisis
- when a parent encourages a 10-year-old to help a neighbour carry her groceries
- when a family gives time or money (from its vacation fund, for example) to help support a neighbourhood family whose father has lost his job
- when a teenager's family welcomes his or her friends on a Saturday night so they can have a safe place to hang out
- when younger children are encouraged to lend a hand by brushing the snow off their grandfather's car
- when a family offers free babysitting services to a single father with three children who needs a break

Even a wounded family can remain the primary source of well-being, spiritual renewal, emotional security and love for its members, as long as it is anchored by individuals who are full of life. At its most basic level, the family is a “bearer of Life.”

No matter what a family's circumstances are, no matter how it suffers or what challenges it faces, when it opens itself to another family, it is a reflection of God – tender, faithful and merciful. It becomes a messenger of the compassionate Love of Christ for us all.

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COLF was jointly founded by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Knights of Columbus. It promotes respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

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1 It is difficult to define “single-parent families,” as many parents who do not live together may share parental responsibility. Whatever the arrangements are, financial and emotional adjustments are unavoidable since there are now two homes. When one parent dies or completely disengages from the family, this leads to additional challenges.

2 The figures in the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) “show quite clearly the growing instability in the unions of today’s Canadian women. The probability of seeing their first unions dissolve is increasing.... The probability of a relationship breaking up is not unrelated to the form of relationship chosen to start conjugal life: common-law unions are generally less stable than marriages.... The first common-law relationship [is] twice as likely to end in separation as the first marriage.” This means that a large number of couples experience a second union. (Statistics Canada, *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada*, July 2002, 6. The figures are comparable for men.)

3 Statistics Canada, *Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues*, October 22, 2002, 7.

4 In general, the kind of assistance geared to crisis situations for these families is seen as temporary relief, but often becomes long-term. The annual income of single-parent families is approximately half that of families with two parents.

5 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful), 1988, no. 34.

6 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000), 2001, no. 50.

7 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (For the Twentieth Anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*), 1987, no. 38.