

HOLY FAMILY COLLEGE'S MISSION STATEMENT

ON FAMILY: A Core Values Reflection for Holy Family College's 2002 Opening Meeting*

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If the family were a container, it would be a nest, an enduring nest, loosely woven, expansive, and open. If the family were a fruit, it would be an orange, a circle of sections, held together but separable—each segment distinct. If the family were a boat, it would be a canoe that makes no progress unless everyone paddles. If the family were a sport, it would be baseball: a long, slow, nonviolent game that is never over until the last out. If the family were a building, it would be an old but solid structure that contains human history, and appeals to those who see the carved moldings under all the plaster, the wide plank floors under the linoleum, the possibilities.¹

This passage is from the writings of Letty Cottin Pogrebin, an American author and lecturer who fuses a strong Jewish identity with an ardent feminism. Her words have a flavor of the parables of Jesus in speaking of the kingdom of heaven: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ... the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field ... the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind.”ⁱⁱ

It is easy to draw the parallel: the family is, in its ideal form, a type or model of the kingdom of heaven itself. The family is a mustard seed, from which a mighty tree can grow. The family is a treasure hidden from the cynicism and arrogance of the world, a treasure for which those who are wise will sell everything they own. And the family is also a strong net that draws together people of every kind, people who can be very different from one another.

A phrase that has become popular in recent years is “the family of choice.” With this phrase arises the idea that we can build families

*Although Holy Family was a college when this presentation was given, the Pennsylvania Department of Education awarded Holy Family “University” status in December 2002

based on choosing our own loved ones and associates. But more often, a family comprises exactly those people we have not chosen – people with whom, in some cases, we might feel we have little in common. And for me this is a large part of the romance and excitement of the family: living in a family means learning to appreciate people who can be very different from us. It means building a history together, of family events and family jokes and family concerns that unite us more than our differences can separate us. It means learning to love those who challenge us, who are incompatible with us, who may annoy and irritate and anger and even hurt us, but who nevertheless have an important place in our lives. In fact, I believe this is one of the biggest reasons most people are born into families: so that we learn how to love.

Holy Family’s mission states, in part: “As a Catholic college Holy Family seeks direction and inspiration from the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, affirms the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and witnesses to the dignity of each person and the oneness of the human family.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The seven core values follow the Mission Statement, and “Family” is the first core value discussed:

Holy Family College welcomes and cares for students, faculty, and staff as members of a diverse but interconnected family. A community united by a common mission, the college promotes an atmosphere of mutual concern and attention to the spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of all those whom it serves.^{iv}

From these statements, it is clear that “family” as defined at Holy Family College has two senses: the “family” of our college community and the broader family of all humankind. The scope of this definition reaches beyond the (more or less) traditional nuclear or extended family of which Pogrebin wrote, but the principle and the parallels are the same. The community of Holy Family College is a nest, loosely woven but enduring, expansive and open. We are a canoe that makes no progress unless everyone paddles, preferably in the same direction. I hesitate to make the baseball analogy until the question of the imminent strike is settled, but it could be said we are part of a long, slow game, requiring teamwork, talent, and loyalty. And we are certainly part of an old but solid structure containing not merely a human past, but also human possibilities.

If this is true for our relatively small college community, it is even truer for the whole human family. We are all part of that venerable structure

called humanity, with its sometimes obscure or boring or brutal history, but which is alive with potential and change. And both here at our college and in a wider sense, we are all part of something we had little choice in constructing; we live among and work with people who may or may not be very different from ourselves, family members we must learn to love.

So what is our response to being part of the diverse family of Holy Family College, to being part of the even more diverse human family? How can we best learn to love each other, foster one another's welfare, and serve one another's needs? A complete answer would fill volumes. Of course, our best example is that of the Holy Family itself – that mysterious triad, in which each member completely loved and was, or rather is, loved by the others. But I feel rather unqualified to speak on such a profound and mystical family love, so instead I will offer you some words from an essay that has always inspired me.

This essay was originally a sermon preached in June of 1941 at the Oxford College Church of St. Mary the Virgin by the beloved writer and Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis. His sermon is still in print, titled "The Weight of Glory." In it, Lewis discusses the concept of glory (in the sense of fame or good report), which awaits those admitted to heaven. He says:

It is written that we shall "stand before" [God], shall appear, and shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God ... to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness ... to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son – it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.^{vi}

On hearing this, you might respond: that's a lovely thought, but what does it have to do with being part of the human family, or the Holy Family family, or even my own family at 50 Oakland Drive, Downingtown? Lewis answers this later in his sermon, in words that have forever changed the way I look at the people around me. When I read them again, they always make the task of loving easier:

It may be asked what practical use there is in the speculations which I have been indulging. I can think of at least one such

use. It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations ... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal ... it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously – no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner – no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.^{vii}

And so, as I think of all my neighbors and “family members” here at Holy Family, my hope is that we may all look forward to the time when we will be beyond time, and we will see each other as we really are – as the marvelous beings God truly created each of us to be. My prayer is that this hope will inspire us to do all we can now to help one another, as well as our students, reach that glorious destination.

ⁱ Pogrebin, Letty Cottin, *Family Politics: Love and Power on an Intimate Frontier* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983) 25-26.

ⁱⁱ *New American Standard Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977) Matt. 13:31, 44, 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holy Family College, *2001-2002 Undergraduate Catalog* ([Philadelphia: Holy Family College], 2001) 5.

iv Holy Family College 5.

v Happily, the strike was averted on August 30 by a last-minute agreement between Major League players and team owners.

vi Lewis, C. S., *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Collier Books, 1980) 13.

vii Lewis 18-19.