

## IT OUGHT TO RUN IN THE FAMILY

NORBERT WENDELL, O.P.



K. CHESTERTON always claimed that St. Clare eloped to the cloister. He also claimed and vigorously held that if St. Clare had been a bride instead of a nun the whole world would have made her a heroine. Yet long before young Gilbert saw the light of day on Campden Hill, Kensington, long before the time of St. Clare herself, yes long before there was such a place as Campden Hill or Kensington there lived a woman who was as much, if not more, of a heroine than St. Clare (or for that matter any other Saint in the Roman calendar). Scripture says of her that she joined "a man's heart to a woman's thought."<sup>1</sup> Which is no mean compliment no matter what its source. The story of the seven Machabees and their grand, glorious, lion-hearted Mother is one of those passages in Sacred Scripture that makes the reader want to stand up and cheer.

Each boy in turn was cruelly tortured and killed before the eyes of his brother and mother and as each one's turn came those remaining "exhorted one another to die manfully."<sup>2</sup> Finally there remained only the youngest boy and his Mother. The tyrant counselled her to deal with the boy that he might renounce the laws of his fathers and save his own life. "She promised that she would counsel her son. So bending herself toward him, mocking the cruel tyrant, she said in her own language: My son, have pity upon me that bore thee nine months in my womb, and gave thee suck three years, and nourished thee, and brought thee up unto this age. I beseech *thee*, my son, look upon heaven and earth, and all that is in them: and consider that God made them out of nothing, and mankind also: So thou shalt not fear this tormentor, but being made a worthy partner with thy brethren, receive death, that in that mercy I may receive thee again with thy brethren."<sup>3</sup> And last of all after the sons the mother also was consumed."<sup>4</sup> A magnificent example of family sanctity—seven boys and

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<sup>1</sup> II Machabees, VII, 21.

<sup>2</sup> II Machabees, VII, 5.

<sup>3</sup> II Machabees, VII, 26-29.

<sup>4</sup> II Machabees, VII, 41.

a mother influencing one another to live and die for the God they loved!

Family sanctity in our day and age has become somewhat outmoded. The modern family operates, in most cases, not as a unit but rather as a group of individuals, with the accent on the individuals. As this individualistic spirit grows, the influence of one member of the family upon another proportionately decreases. In the olden days it was quite generally conceded that there was one black sheep in every family; today perhaps it would be more accurate to say there is only one white sheep—and the rest of the family are strangely silent as to just what color they are. It used to be said that Mary had a little lamb; now they say, "Mary has the religion for our family," and, breathing a sigh of relief, take that fact as a perfectly legitimate excuse for their own lack of proficiency along those lines.

And so the modern family settles down to its humdrum existence that it is represented at the Courts of Heaven by one white sheep and secretly happy that one is enough. They themselves are not black sheep, they are not white sheep; rather they have taken on that in-between color, a dull battleship gray, which somehow suggest those words of Our Lord to the mediocre: "I would thou wert cold or hot, but because thou art lukewarm. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile Mary, the white sheep, works out her sanctity alone. Her sister Helen and her brother Tom admire her, sometimes they even wish they had her goodness—but imitate her! No, that would be too hard! And so they leave her very severely alone.

However it was not always thus. There used to be such a thing as family sanctity. The Mary of 1937 has as her prototype a Mary of Bethany who had a sister, Martha, and a brother, Lazarus—all three of them saints. It is significant that of all the homes in Judea Our Lord loved this one best. It was an oasis of love in a desert of hate and indifference. Jesus visited Bethany, not because Martha was a good housekeeper, not because He liked the home as such, but because He loved the ones who made up the home.

Nor is this phenomena of family sanctity anything to be wondered at. The wonder is that there are not more Saints in the family. "Goodness," the Scholastics insisted, "diffuses itself." "One loving heart," says St. Augustine, "sets another on fire." One cannot come into contact with a Saint and go away the same; one is either better or worse. Twelve men spent three busy, eventful years with Jesus Christ. Eleven of those men are Saints of the Universal Church; the twelfth starved himself to death by refusing to love

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<sup>5</sup> Apoc., III, 15, 16.

Love. Then, too, Peter and Andrew were brothers in the flesh, so were Jude and James the Less, and so were those two irrepressible Sons of Thunder, James the Great and John the Beloved. Sanctity surely ran in the Apostolic families.

St. Benedict and St. Scholastica were brother and sister. What is more, there is a tradition (which St. Bede accepts) that they were twins! Although separated a great part of their lives they seem to have made it a rule to see one another once a year. They met for the last time three days before Scholastica's death. It was a day "when the sky was so clear that no cloud was to be seen." Yet when it came time for Benedict to leave, God at the prayer of Scholastica, sent "suddenly such a tempest of lightning and thundering, and such an abundance of rain, that neither venerable Benedict nor his monks who were with him could put their heads out of doors."<sup>6</sup> Which would seem to indicate that God thought enough of this little family gathering to send a first class thunderstorm in order to prolong it.

Another religious founder, St. Dominic, came from a family noted for its sanctity. Joanna of Aza, the mother of St. Dominic, and Mannes, a brother, have both been beatified. Another brother, Antonio, who became a secular priest, was also remarkable for his holiness. While on this subject of religious founders, it might be interesting to note that St. Alexis Falconieri, one of the seven founders of the Servites, was an uncle of St. Juliana Falconieri. Perhaps some day a scholar will come along who will give us an exhaustive account of the Saints and their saintly relatives, and also an account of those saints who have been started on the high road to holiness by their wholesome early home environment.

Goodness, however, does not diffuse itself indiscriminately. For many years Augustine lived a life that was anything but holy and still had St. Monica as a mother. Goodness never diffuses itself where it is not wanted. It is possible to be starving to death in a well filled bakery and go on starving; so also it is possible to live with a saint and go on sinning. Both are equally unreasonable.

It is not surprising, then, that some of the immediate relatives of some of the Saints were scoundrels; nor is it surprising that Judas Iscariot could live with Our Lord and still sell Him for thirty pieces of silver. For two years the family of St. Thomas Aquinas held him captive endeavouring by every means in its power to destroy his vocation. The story, however, has a happy ending for the Aquino family (probably in imitation of Thomas) fell on somewhat happier and holier ways of acting. Don Bosco had a step-brother who was not the

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\* St. Gregory, *Dial.*, XXIII.

easiest person in the world to get along with, while St. Juliana Falconieri and St. Rose of Lima are only two examples of girls of exceptional beauty and attractiveness who had to battle against irritable and worldly-minded mothers who were set on making suitable marriages for their lovely, but unwilling, daughters.

Goodness, then, is always ready to diffuse itself, *but only where it is wanted*. And the difficulty today seems to be that goodness is simply not wanted. Therefore, goodness is not diffusing itself. Or, if it is wanted, it is not wanted enough to pay the price of goodness, which is generous love and sacrifice. Hence we find the family today disintegrating, rotting from within, dying of a selfishness which finds its expression in terms of divorce, birth control, and euthanasia.

All this in the face of hundreds of examples (past and present) of family saints and of family sanctity and in flat contradiction to the example of the most perfect family that ever inhabited this earth, the family in which every member was a saint. There was nothing selfish, exclusive or individualistic about this family: each member lived and worked for the other. The father was a carpenter, the mother was a virgin and the Child was God.

## GIFTS

RAYMOND VIVIER, O.P.

See what I bring you, little One:  
No woolly lamb, no shining drum;  
No myrrh, frankincense, ruddy gold,  
Like Orient Kings in days of old—

I bring the price of lonely years,  
Of wooded cross, of Mary's tears,  
A something of myself a part,  
All that I have—I bring my heart.