

God of the Ordinary

Spirituality of Passionist Family Groups

"Elijah was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.' For at that moment Yahweh was going by. A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks . but Yahweh was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a tiny whispering sound. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then the voice of Yahweh came to him ." (1Kings 19: 11-13)

By John Kleinsman

The surprise in this story is not that Elijah encounters God, but the way he encounters God. The Israelites typically expected God's revelation in the spectacular; through the marvellous, even frightening elements of nature such as mighty winds, earthquakes, lightning and fire.

So we can understand, therefore, Elijah's disappointment and concern when the Lord was neither in the mighty winds, nor the earthquakes, nor the fire. Moreover, we can imagine Elijah's surprise when the Lord appears in a tiny whispering sound. The might and power of God almighty in a tiny whisper? Not at all expected. Too unspectacular. Too ordinary. How easily he could have missed it!

How might this story apply to us and to Family Groups? Well, where do you expect to find God? Ask any Catholic, indeed any Christian, about the traditional ways in which they expect to encounter God. It's my guess that they will all say pretty much the same things: when we gather for liturgy, in our times of personal and group prayer/sharing, or when we study the scriptures.

It's true we do experience God in these places and at these times. These dimensions always have been and always will be key to our Christian identity. But Elijah's God and our God is not bound by religious systems or by traditional expectations. Our God is a God of surprises, a God of the unexpected and above all, a God of the ordinary.

The focus of Passionist Family Groups is that we do indeed encounter God and experience God-moments outside the four walls of our churches and beyond the sacred spaces where we spend time in prayer. The spirituality of Family Groups is based around the reality that we encounter God in the ordinary; in the ordinariness of our daily lives and in the ordinariness of our social relationships. In other words, our relationships with one another - the social - are recognised as a space to meet God - the social is capable of revealing the divine.

Sadly, it seems many people find this hard to believe. We seem more comfortable in separating the social and the spiritual! Perhaps, like Elijah and the Israelites of his time, we have very strong expectations about meeting God only in certain ways.

This difficulty of believing that God can be encountered in the ordinary is something Kerry and I experience all the time. Above all it is found in the (very mistaken) understanding that Family Groups, because they seem to focus around social activities, are "just social." We believe however it is only people who fail to recognise God can be in the ordinary who can possibly have such an understanding.

The notion that God can be encountered in the people around us is a fundamental principle of the Family Group Movement. This logic is also expressed by Jesus in the New Testament many times,

most notably in the well known passage from Matthew's Gospel: "As long as you do it to the least of your brothers or sisters you do it to me." (Mt 25: 40).

Sometimes the need of a person close to us is to receive practical support by way of meals or other means. Sometimes the response called for is simply to get alongside and listen. Sometimes there is a need for us to grieve with others. Sometimes it is a need to celebrate important milestones such as anniversaries, births or baptisms. Always there is the need to converse with, understand, accept and love in real, concrete, and ordinary ways. This is what Family Groups are all about. The gatherings in which we share food and drink and play games are the vehicle whereby we build relationships of trust so we can get close enough to people to recognise their needs.

Let's face it, we all know that as a rule people don't stand up and announce to the world their need for support and help. We prefer to suffer in silence. At best we are prepared to 'whisper' to those we feel care about us. We will only pick up God's voice in the tiny whisperings of persons when we are able to get close enough to them.

Surely, in a time when more and more Catholics seem to be practising their faith "outside the four walls of our churches" there is a greater need than ever to promote movements and structures which recognise we encounter God in a multitude of ways.

- How well do you know the people in your parish community?
- Who are the people in your parish who are lonely, suffering or needing support in some way? The fact you don't know of any does not mean that they are not there!
- How is your parish reaching out to those on the "margins" - to those who do not attend the weekly Eucharist?
- Have you thought about getting involved in a Family Group?
- If you are already involved, are you hearing God in the tiny whisperings?