

## Late night family reflections

Fr. Michael Tracey

We had gathered as a family during August to surprise and celebrate my brother's 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. He was the final member of the family to have reached that particular milestone. Other members of the family has celebrated theirs years earlier. In fact, my older sister was celebrating her 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary at the same time.

Days later, we sat around a turf fire to reflect on and continue to celebrate the various milestones. Amid drinking gallons of tea and munching on all kinds of homemade goodies, everyone became reflective. Maybe, it was the late night and the chance not only to reflect on the event but also our own individual journeys that fueled the conversation. In fact, the clock had passed the midnight hour earlier.

The conversation began with the topic of annulments as one of my sisters began to talk about a friend who was petitioning for an annulment and what was becoming part of the process for the petitioner. Obviously, I had my own input in clarifying the process.

Naturally, the conversation led to marriage and the preparation involved in preparing to receive the sacrament. Each of my sisters talked about the preparation they went through before marriage. We talked about, not only preparation programs but also expectations of marriage, attitudes of people asking to be married in the church, cohabitating couples and the easy access to divorce available to people. I shared some of my own experience in working with couples. Obviously, some family members asked how priests make judgments on the readiness of a couple for marriage in the church.

The conversation then led to Mass attendance today and the decline in Mass attendance among the young people. The comments were both interesting and insightful. One of my brother-in-laws was very definite as to why he went to church. He said that he didn't go because of any rules or regulations but because he wanted to. He said the same about his prayer life. He also talked about his experience of church growing up and how it shaped him.

All of the family members talked about their children and their attitude to church, God, faith and prayer. The obvious thread throughout their comments was the very individualistic attitude of their children to their faith. All, to some degree or another, did not see religion as a sense of belonging or community, but rather as a private, if not minimal, relationship with God.

The conversation finally ended at 1:30 a.m. when someone looked at the clock and said, "I think it is time to go to bed." Everyone agreed.

As I thought about the conversations later, I was impressed by the candor, insights, and concerns that were shared.

I also thought about each family member's involvement in their various parishes and ministries. My older sister and her husband are very much involved in their parish for over 40 years and have a wonderful relationship with priests who often frequent their home in England. My younger sister, a nurse and bereavement counselor, also serves as a child protection officer for her parish. My youngest sister continues to spearhead collecting and sending truckloads of supplies to impoverished areas in Eastern Europe. My brother and his wife are very much involved in their parish and community.

Later on, I picked up a book that my sister, the nurse, was reading. It was titled "Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures," written by Pope Benedict XVI before he became Pope. The book suggested "we are living in a period of great dangers and of great opportunities both for man and for the world, a period that also imposes a great responsibility on all of us." He goes on to say that "the possibilities for self-manipulation that man has acquired...makes him more able to construct man on his own...man enters the world no longer as a gift of the Creator but as the product of our activity...man is nothing more now than the image of man – but of what man?"