



Insider writes the book on healthy marriage and family

By Lou Baldwin

“We believe that love is our mission, and that mission is the only way we can be fully alive and be who we were created to be. We believe this love should be taught, shared, and communicated in and through the family, the domestic church.”

This line is taken from the summary statement of “Love is Our Mission: the Family Fully Alive,” the preparatory catechesis for the World Meeting of the Families that will be held in Philadelphia next September. Many parishes are using it as a study guide as they prepare for the historic event.

The catechesis, which is a joint effort of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and published by “Our Sunday Visitor,” represents the work of a number of theologians.

Chief among them is Christopher Roberts, a member of Our Mother of Consolation Parish in Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill section who was ultimately charged with putting the catechism together.

Roberts brings a number of skills to the table. He is a trained theologian with a Ph.D. in Christian ethics, he has the zeal and fire of a convert to Catholicism, and for him, Christian family life is not an abstract study.

He and his wife Hannah are the parents of three young children — Martha, 9; Ruth, 6; and Sarah, 3 — with a fourth joyfully expected in the very near future. Hannah recently authored, along with Betsy Puntel, “A Child’s Book of the Mass,” published this year.

Growing up in Baltimore, the son of a Baptist minister and educated in Quaker schools, Roberts, now 45, could not possibly have imagined he would someday be a Catholic theologian.

His undergraduate degree at Yale was in environmental studies and religious studies, but his bent was toward the liberal arts. So when the opportunity for a scholarship at Oxford University arose he accepted and was off to England for a master’s in theology and ethics.

That’s where he met Hannah, who was also studying at Oxford.

She was a cradle Catholic from Yorkshire, that corner of England where the Catholic faith, watered by the blood of such martyrs as Margaret Clitherow, was never really extinguished during the Protestant Revolution.



Christopher Roberts

Their denominational differences were not a factor, and 17 years ago they married at a Benedictine monastery. At times they would attend Catholic Mass, other times a Protestant service. The truth is, although committed Christians, they were searching.

Roberts’ first nudge toward Catholicism came through an Anglican Mass he attended while at Oxford. “Everybody got down on their knees to pray, I had never knelt to pray in my life,” he recalls. “It was so jarring to me, so intimate. It kind of exploded in me. It made my heart so vulnerable and that began a long attraction to sacramental worship.”

It was a family crisis in 2002 that ultimately brought him to Catholicism. He and Hannah were generally attending evangelical services, when the sudden death of Hannah’s father really affected her. He instinctively felt Hannah could receive most comfort through the faith of her birth and they began attending Mass regularly.

One Sunday a priest from Ghana was the celebrant. The text of the Epistle was from Acts 6, where a dispute arose over the equitable distribution of alms to the widows. The theme, as it was developed by the homilist, emphasized that from the very beginning there were conflicts in the church but because Christ is with the church, they were overcome and that remains true today.

“That took the wind out of my sails. I thought, ‘You are right, Jesus is with the church,’” Roberts recalls. Any latent bias against the Catholic faith fell away, and this coupled with a desire for Eucharist led him to become Catholic in 2005.

At this time Roberts is three years into his formation for the permanent diaconate and is scheduled to be ordained three years from now.

In his professional life, he worked in research for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), continued his education toward a Ph.D. in religion and ethics at Kings College, London, and he was a religion editor and correspondent for the PBS program, “Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly.”

The family moved to Chestnut Hill in 2000 and he taught ethics at Villanova University for four years. In 2008 he published a book, “Creation & Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage,” and he has

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been published in several magazines include *Commonweal* and *First Things*.

In all of his work, Hannah plays a significant part. "My wife has a degree in theology too," he said. "She is my constant partner and proofreader. I write about family life, she lives it."

In his writings, including the catechism, Roberts said his goal is "helping people connect their faith to their everyday life; helping people to see the theological foundation to the way life goes."

"I pray," he said, "with all my mind the World Meeting of Families will be a spark that revitalizes the Church in Philadelphia, which, let's be honest, is hurting in many ways."

"I hope the papal visit will reanimate Catholic life in Philadelphia. What a privilege it is to be part of that."

The theology of marriage is really his specialty, and he proposes, "To make a marriage work you have to know how to compromise; you have to know how to put aside your own appetites and your own way of doing things. You have to put that aside sometimes and see it from the other's point of view. Selfishness is the death of marriage."

It's not just married life, Roberts believes. "I really think a wise, healthy celibate and a healthy marriage have a lot in common," he said. "Whether it is marriage or celibacy you are following the way of the cross."

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Operation Santa Claus still going strong at Ryan H.S.

Remember Operation Santa Claus? For many years it was a signature program for the Community Service Corps (CSC), with pretty much all of the Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia participating by supplying toys for needy children during the Christmas season.

It faded away a few years ago before the Office for Youth and Young Adults (OYYA) closed in 2012.

One school where Operation Santa Claus is very much alive is Archbishop Ryan High School in Northeast Philadelphia.

Sister of St. Joseph Frances Antoinette, who teaches theology at Ryan, has been running it for the past 24 years and has seen it grow from 81 children assisted to 183 children this year.

The reason it is still going strong is because it was a strictly local effort independent of OYYA, although that wasn't the case in the very beginning.

"When I came I noticed none of the gifts were coming back to families from our feeder schools, so we started our own," Sister Frances Antoinette said.

The reason for this was the Far Northeast parishes did not have a high poverty rate relative to some

other sections, particularly the inner city, where the gifts were distributed. But every area has some poverty and Sister Frances Antoinette thought the school should assist families in the feeder parishes from which Ryan received its students.

Although the feeder school system has been abolished, Sister Frances Antoinette sends the gifts to the schools in its traditional area, which still in fact supply the bulk of students to the high school.

"We assist families in St. Albert the Great, Maternity B.V.M., St. Christopher, St. Anselm, St. Martha, Christ the King, St. Katherine of Siena (all in Philadelphia) and St. Charles Borromeo (Bensalem)," Sister Frances Antoinette said.

The classes are also where the fundraising is conducted to buy the toys, and more funds may be raised in other ways such as a bake sale. No one at Ryan, other than Sister Frances Antoinette, knows the names of the children who will receive gifts.

The drive starts right after Thanksgiving and ends a week or so before Christmas.

The gifts tend to be simple – board

games, books, etc., and each child will receive six gifts, with a total cost of \$35-\$40.

After the drive closes Sister Frances Antoinette's students and those in the CSC go on a big Saturday shopping spree to such places as Five Below and Wal-Mart. Then a big wrapping party follows.

The wrapped presents are then returned to the parish school where parents are asked to pick up the gifts.

"I'm always touched by the enthusiasm and generosity of our students," Sister Frances Antoinette said. Nick Belamorich and John Thackrah, co-presidents of Ryan's CSC, seconded those sentiments.

"Operation Santa Claus is a great way to give back to the community and an awesome way to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas by being Christ-like in our actions," Thackrah said.

"Knowing that young children will be so very grateful for the gifts they receive is a gift to me," Belamorich said. "The love they experience I am sure is something they will pass on to future generations."

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