

‘Family Groups Are Just Social’- Reflections on an Unreflective Putdown  
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(Based on ideas suggested in talks by Fr Peter McGrath many years ago.)

Every group is by definition social. So, any community, such as the Sunday Mass community, is social. Wherever two or three people are gathered we have a group, and so it is necessarily a social group. If the group gathers in Christ’s name, it is still social.

So, Family Groups are certainly social, just as the congregation at Mass on Sunday is necessarily social. Is there anything inherently wrong with being social? What is limiting about a Family Group being social? Let’s consider the nature of Family Groups in terms of the sacraments.

In Baptism we are welcomed into the Christian community. It is a social sacrament. In Family Groups all are welcome. No-one is rejected on any grounds. This is the essence of the Christian community. Family Groups are the sacrament of Baptism in action, accepting people as they are.

In Confirmation we receive the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. Guidance and strength, insight and wisdom, come not only from praying, and not only from an ordained person, but from anybody in the community, anywhere. The Spirit blows where it will. In Family Groups we support, guide, and strengthen one another in good times and bad. One aim of Family Groups is for people to get to know one another better, and it is through the deepening of relationships that we can better help, guide, and strengthen one another when confronted with personal, family, or community problems.

In the Eucharist we share Christ with one another in a mysterious and intimate way through eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ. It is not surprising that the major Family Group functions involve the sharing of food and drink. It is through such sharing that communities grow. However, look at many weekend Mass congregations. Many attending share in the Body and Blood of Christ, but they then share little of anything else with each other. They may not know the names of most other people in the church, much less speak to them and show an interest in their welfare. Family Groups aim to break down barriers, so that the Eucharistic celebration is indeed a celebration by a whole community. The sharing of food and drink at Family Group functions develops what begins at Mass, and, in turn, leads to the Mass being a more meaningful community celebration.

In Reconciliation we confess our faults and weaknesses and ask forgiveness for sins of commission and omission by which we have hurt God or our neighbour. Family Groups recognise human weakness and encourage people to forgive and accept others, so that they too might be forgiven their own faults.

Anointing of the Sick offers strength to the unwell in body and spirit. One of the major functions of Family Groups is caring for those who are unwell, be it in mind or heart. Through visiting the sick and their families and providing assistance with very practical matters such as meals, this sacrament is made more visible and enduring by those caring.

In Matrimony a couple receive the grace to love and support one another in good times and in bad, to be faithful to one another, and to raise their children in a loving and responsible manner. Family groups aim to strengthen family bonds in a time when family life is being fragmented.

In Holy Orders selected people are ordained for the purpose of leading and developing the people of God, the latter in part by the administration of the sacraments. As shown above, Family Groups extend the sacraments into the daily world and so both continue and develop the work of ordained people.

In conclusion, Family Groups are certainly social. And so are the sacraments. Family Groups bring the sacraments to life in people’s daily lives. They are certainly more than ‘just’ social.