

A Blessed Vision

The Jesuit Institute for Family Life International Network offers loving counsel for families in crisis

By Dick Bushnell
Photos by Peter Lemieux



In 1961, while riding with two Jesuits from Los Gatos to San Francisco, Bob Fabing was sitting in the back seat reciting the rosary. As the car

approached the Westlake area on the southern edge of the city and Fabing saw the long rows of houses lining the hillsides, he says he felt the presence of Christ within him saying ‘ “Bob, do you see all the pain in those houses?’ And Christ showed me the pain there. I said in response ‘Yes. Lord’ Christ within me said ‘Will you do something about that?’ I said ‘Okay.’ ”

The encounter lasted about 4 minutes, recalls Father Bob Fabing, S.J., but he couldn’t bring himself to tell anyone about it at the time. “I was just 19,” explains Fr. Fabing, who was then a first-year novice, having entered the Society of Jesus in 1960 at the Sacred Heart Novitiate in Los Gatos.

Finally in 1973, he told the story of his encounter to the provincial, then Father Dick Vaughan, S. J., who encouraged him to pursue his vision. “In 1976, Dick Vaughan sent me to the Jesuit Retreat House in Los Altos to start the institute and a 36-day retreat program in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius,” says Fr. Fabing. In the fall of the same year, Fr. Fabing opened the Jesuit Institute for Family Life. It grew gradually, following Fr. Fabing’s philosophy to “start small, go slow.”

In 1982, with the help of the next provincial, Father John Clark, S.J., the first satellite office opened at Holy Family Church in San Jose. It was called the Holy Family Institute for Family Life. Each subsequent office was named for its host parish, reflecting Fr. Fabing’s belief that each local branch be “homegrown from its own environment.”

Over the years, more offices sprung up around California, from Santa Rosa to Sacramento to San Diego. “Every time I opened another one, I got the same feeling,” says Fr. Fabing, referring to his vision that day in San Francisco. “It was

the same experience, the same Jesus saying the same thing over and over as I drove the California freeways.”

Now, as the institute celebrates its 30th anniversary, it offers counseling and therapy for children, adolescents, marred couples, individuals, and families from all walks of life. The institute serves as a back-up system for parish priests, religious sisters, and school principals who may not have the time or expertise to deal with complex family issues. “Ninety-nine percent of our clients are Catholic, but we’ll see anybody from Anglicans to Unitarians as well as non believers,” says Fr. Fairing.

The institute staff, which is composed of Catholic religious and laypersons, are licensed, trained, and experienced in their fields. Counseling fees are set on a sliding scale based on the client’s income. “No one is turned away,” adds Fr. Fabing.

Fr. Fabing refers to the institute’s offices as “silent refugee camps, People don’t talk about defect that they come here,” he explain, referring to the confidential and often distressed state of the couples and families who make their way to the ministry.

What’s the most common problem facing American families? “They tell us: ‘We’re overscheduled. We’re suffering because were pulled in so many directions we don’t have any quality time together. We don’t have the down time we need just to talk.’ ”

Pan of that problem is often self-imposed: “If you’re over scheduled, you don’t have to face what each other is experiencing,” Fr. Fabing notes, “People say there’s a vocation crisis—not enough priests. But there is another vocation crisis: There’s not enough mothering and fathering going on.’ Some parents spend 12 hours a day at their jobs, returning home with no energy left “The family is being eaten alive—that’s not what Christ wants,” he says.



California based counselors from left to right John Martinez, Judith Kramp, Rory Santamaria, Joan Avanzino, Flor de Maria Sanchez, Sister Ann Rooney, R.S.M., John Tweten.

Once a family contacts the institute, a counselor sets up a meeting. The problem-solving process begins with the counselor listening to their complaints, then asking questions about their background.

“Our initial process is to take pictures of their here-and-now complaints and their history, then look at the two pictures,” Fr. Fabing explains. “We’re not here to put a Band-aid on their situation; we’re here to work it out from its root origins. They’re only going to be resolved from the Inside out.”

Of course, the problems presented by family life aren’t confined to the United States, With that in mind—and with the encouragement of Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.—Fr. Fabing extended the institute’s mission other countries, opening satellite offices in Kinshasa-Gombe, Congo (2004); Prague, Czech Republic (2005); Tijuana, Mexico (2006); and Taipei, Taiwan (2006).

Through the experience of offering families assistance, Fr. Fabing says he “became powerfully aware of how Christ is concerned with what goes on between men and women, between husbands and and wives, between parents and children, and between brothers and sisters...Christ keeps bringing me back to how God desires that men and women love and serve each other In famines and than houses be homes hill of love.”

At another level, Fr. Fabing says, “The integration of psychotherapy and Ignatian spiritual direction is what we’re working on. What were really doing is enculturating the event of the discovery of the unconscious with the history and flow of Western spirituality.”

Sharing bags and handshakes, counselors and friends offer each other a sign of peace during the Eucharist celebrated by Father Bob Fabing, S.J. Mass is an integral part of each staff meeting.



SIX STEPS TO Resolve a Family Crisis

CRISES HAPPEN IN ALL FAMILIES and everyone needs to do their part to resolve them.

1. Many times it is easier to pretend that there is no crisis—or to minimize the crisis—than it is to admit something is not right.

Example: Junior has been caught smoking pot at school. Be willing to admit that Junior’s grades have been falling lately and this may not be just a one-time experiment.

2. When your family is ready—or is forced—to

deal with a crisis, be willing to admit what the problem really is. Part of the problem is that Junior’s parents don’t come home until 7 p.m.

3. Every member of a family has a perspective and a reaction; everyone

needs to feel important by having others hear his or her feedback on the situation. Hold a family meeting and give everyone a chance to talk.

5. Crises happen in all families and everyone needs to do their part to resolve them. Mom will find a program, Junior will attend that program, and Dad will call the program

4. A solution that does not "fit" into this Family's way of living will not be a solution that lasts for long. It won't work to decide that Junior should stay home after school if no one else is there to supervise. after school every day for an update.

6. Set a reasonable time to talk again to see if the solution is working. If not, start again from the top.

Cutting back on the parents' work load and/or finding an after-school activity for Junior would be better solutions.

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For a directory of institute offices, go to <http://www.jiflinet.com>. If you would like to help the institute financially or personally, call Fr Bob Fabing at (650) 917 - 4021.

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