

## **THE PASSIONIST FAMILY GROUP MOVEMENT**

The logo of the PFGM explains its aims. It has a heart encircling an extended family made up of different ages and nationalities. Within the heart is a cross. This is to denote that different people come together to create a sense of family and together they carry one another's burdens and carry each others crosses in response to Jesus' call to discipleship. Because it is a Movement, PFG's keep adapting to the needs and circumstances and is directed by the spirituality of the Passionists.

It is true that in most parishes people do not know one another. It is also true that some people are keen to help others but don't know how to help the everyday people who might be in need. The Passionist Family Group Movement is one way of meeting these various needs. People who live in a parish where there is a real feeling of community, look at life and church quite differently as many families have found.

Through this movement, families choose to belong to other families. In forming a Family Group an attempt is made to include some people of a similar age (both adults and children). Single parent parents, widows and single people of various ages are all included. There are normally ten to fifteen families. The sub-motto is "A Family for All". Within the parish, Coordinators are appointed by the parish priest. These co-ensure that the simple and basic principles are kept in mind. Together with the group coordinators, the parish priest and the Passionist Directors, they work to keep alive the spirit of the Family Groups.

The groups gather about once a month which allows the members to get to know one another and to enjoy time together. Families are encouraged to take turns in organising functions to create variety and share responsibility. The bonding of relationships is greatly assisted by a weekend away once a year. This allows the extended family time to get to know one another, which is vital for true community. Often this weekend away is what really binds the group. The monthly get togethers are necessary, but in reality it is what happens in between these monthly get togethers that makes a group bond and grow.

The spirit of the Passionist Family Groups is based on the recognition that everyone is called to show an active Christian holiness in their everyday life. Cooking meals for others, visiting the sick, phoning the lonely, etc, are real expressions of this everyday Christian living that takes religion out of the "once a week mentality" and allows it to become a "day in, day our faith". Living in fellowship and caring for one another comes naturally to a family. Christians are called to live in that kind of fellowship.

Passionist Family Groups encourage Christian living, so they are not prayer groups or discussion groups. Some Family Group members will want to belong to such groups, but they don't have to ask their PFG to become anything other than a Christian family. They may choose to discuss and to pray at appropriate times, but neither of these activities gives them their identity. Like any family they can pray and discuss at appropriate times and it is hoped that each PFG would hold a Eucharist or some other liturgy at least once a year.

As in any family, prayer and celebration comes out of the life of the group and occurs when there is a need or a desire. Many people have belonged to “task” groups such as a fete committee, a school building committee, tuck shop etc and they know the relationships end or become weaker when the task is completed. The emphasis in such groups is more on what you do rather than who you are. Passionist Family Groups encourage ‘being’ ahead of ‘doing’. They are not social groups. They are gospel based inclusive families, whose members are committed to love, support and care for one another. Part of achieving that closeness, is spending time together in simple activities such as picnics and pot luck dinners.

It is easy to know whether a PFG is working. Do the members love and care for one another? That is the proof. It is not whether they are having plenty of get togethers, but whether the get togethers are helping them to know, love and care for one another.

In the early days of most parishes, people gathered either in small churches or private homes, as people had done in the early church, and there was a great feeling of togetherness. As numbers swelled, this was lost. Some strong bonds remain, but most strangers or newcomers to the parish wouldn’t know it – or feel it. Passionist Family Groups can help restore that togetherness. Rather than the parish being a collection of families, Passionist Family Groups try to help units of families to become one family. This increases people’s sense of belonging and allows them a family that will support and encourage them.

Passionist Family Groups began in Terrey Hills, Sydney in 1973. A second parish began in late 1982, and a Brisbane parish in 1983. In 1988 PFG’s came to the North Island and in 1992 to the South Island. By 2003 Passionist Family Groups had spread to over 420 parishes in Australia and New Zealand including a handful of parishes in the USA..

The PFGM has allowed people to experience and live those goals that were integral to the early church, sharing and celebrating faith, support one another, especially in times of need, reaching out to and including others, showing Christian example to others, especially children, contribute each others gifts and talents and building a sense of extended family.

In every parish there are some people with no sense of belonging. There are always some others who don’t want to belong and this must be respected. However if people are not prepared to reach and include those on the ‘outside’ how can the gospel ever be lived? In this way PFG’s reflect the simple vision Jesus had, that we drop the barriers which keep us apart and reach out in a spirit of fellowship. When we accept others who are different and reach out to those in need and when we begin to share meals with others who are not our natural friends in the spirit of the gospel, we bring that gospel alive to ourselves and others.

There are three levels or aspects of spirituality, head, heart and gut. The head or insight aspect is most often experienced through what we hear or read in books, lectures or discussion and it is extremely valuable and necessary.

The gut or appreciation aspect is most often experienced through the emotion in prayer and liturgy and this of course is also extremely valuable and necessary. The heart or living aspect of spirituality is brought alive when we love and is experienced most often through care, support and belonging. .

Both St Paul and St James warn that love without actions is useless, and PFG spirituality seeks to learn from this advice. The other aspects of Christian spirituality can be expressed when appropriate, but first and foremost PFG members are called to 'love one another'. Not every members appreciates this, but for many it begins to happen before they realise what they are doing.

The PFG aims are simple.

- To live and love like the early Christians
- To share Christian life together
- To support one another, especially in times of need
- To give example to others, especially children
- To build community in the parish.

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