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Faith Today

The love-without-conditions

By Father Herbert Weber
NC News Service

I enjoy camping during the summer and early autumn months. Sometimes I get off the beaten path, but often I have pitched tent in the family sections of state parks or private campgrounds.

What always surprises me is that people forget one simple fact: The nylon or canvas that prevents one from seeing in or out of a tent does not act as a barrier to voices.

Camping next to a family can be somewhat like listening in on a party line.

Professional training and experience in family counseling have taught me not to expect a family to be free from all squabbles, misunderstandings and disagreements. What disturbs me,

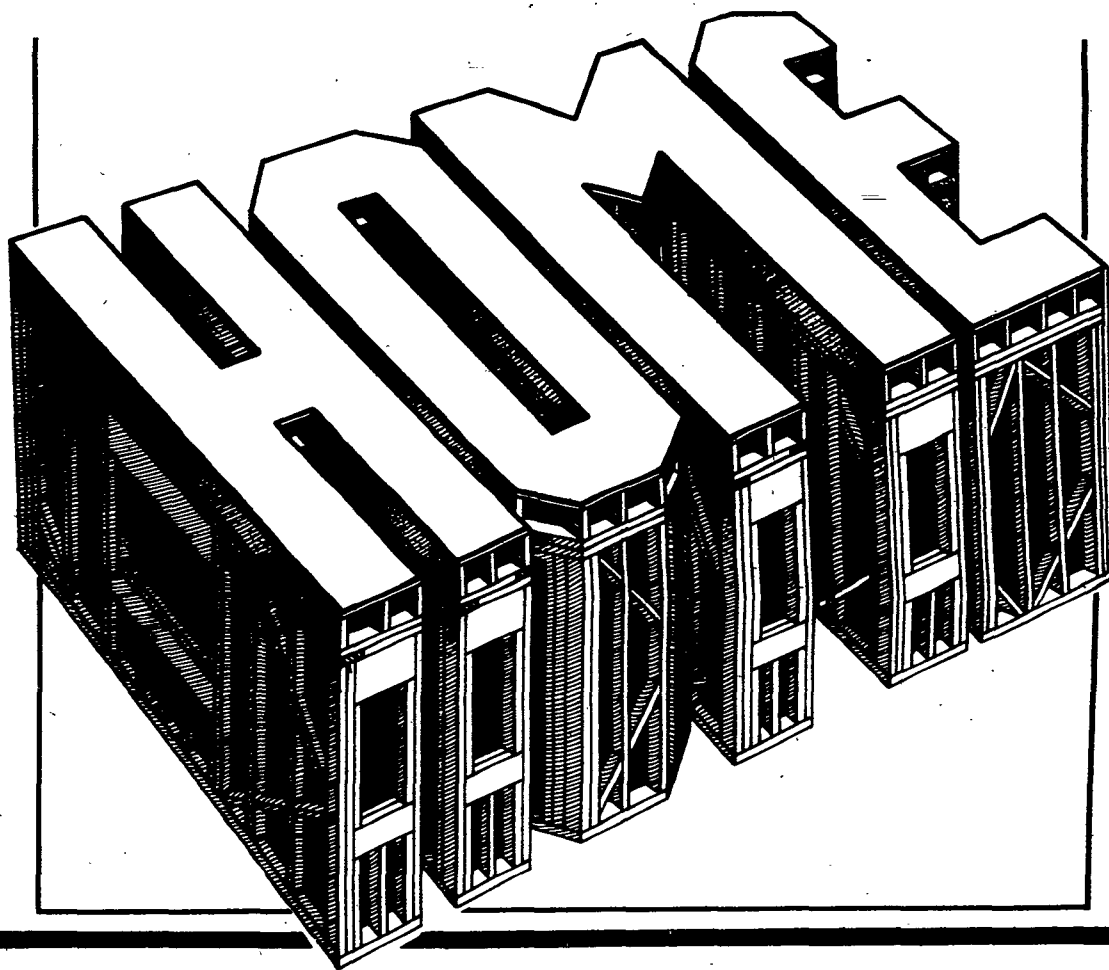
however, is that some families fill their days with put-downs. They do not make allowances for mistakes or failures; threats of retaliation are more evident than forgiveness.

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Families, like individuals, have vocations. The Christian family is called to be a place where mistakes can be made and members can be appreciated in their imperfections. In short, the vocation of a family is to be a practice field for expressing love without conditions.

Such love means a warm regard for one another without the use of phrases like "Unless..." "As long as..." and "If..."

But conditional terms like those are heard often. An elementary teacher, who must have been having a hard day, prepared a response to the prayers of petition that her fourth-graders were to read at Mass. The response was, "God loves us if we are good." I recall her genuine surprise when I told her that I could not use that response because it would suggest



that God does not love us when we are not good.

Whenever families create an environment of acceptance regardless of failures and mistakes, they have forged ahead in their response to the Christian calling. Parents, of course, will continue to have the responsibility to instruct and guide their children in values and principles for living. But all family members need to learn that loving and being loved are not contingent on performance. Otherwise they will have a

difficult time in the years ahead.

At the university parish where I presently am located, students often come for informal and short-term counseling. Many indicate that they do not think others will accept them if their weaknesses become known.

Such attitudes lead to all kinds of inner turmoil and self-doubt. At the same time, these students often have unrealistic expectations of others.

When a family lives by a love without condi-

tions, honest perceptions of self and others are fostered. There is less need to impress or be impressed.

Especially important is a growing sensitivity to persons in need. Perhaps those who have been loved regardless of their merit realize that respect for individual dignity is not dependent on such externals as annual income, social status or grade-point averages.

These persons are able to refrain from judgmental attitudes that hinder many of us when we try to become conscious of the needs of others. Truly, the family that expresses a love for its members through thick and thin is an outreach family; it starts with its own members, but definitely reaches beyond.

A married couple I know, who have had their share of disappointments with their children, continually made it clear that love was there for the children regardless of the type of problem. Yet the woman was extremely puzzled one day; she asked why her children always defended their friendless and unsophisticated schoolmates. She was glad that they had such a Christlike feature, but wasn't sure where they had learned it.

I wonder if she did not realize how much that trait was taught at home.

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Any vocation is just a response to God's communication to us. The family that accepts its vocation to be a love-without-condition household is responding to the Lord who first loved the human family unconditionally.

God has loved us even when we were not good. That is the type of love all of us — especially Christian families — are called to imitate.

(Father Weber is a pastor and author in Bowling Green, Ohio.)

FAMILY

A home should be a place where members are accepted despite flaws, writes Father Herbert Weber. The vocation of the family, he says, is to extend an unconditional love to each member.