

Saying ‘I Love You’

A reflection from Archbishop Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R

My dad never said “I love you.”

Not long ago I was in one of the communities of our archdiocese that has a majority of Indigenous members. I got into a conversation with one gentleman about ... Indian Residential Schools, of course. It was a good conversation, long and challenging. Some soul-searching questions, as you might imagine.

He raised an issue that I had heard of before - parenting of children. In the case of girls especially, the experience was that if someone attended a residential school, they were absent from their parents for many months of the year. They did not have a family experience of being raised. They were raised by teachers, in our case priests and nuns who were not themselves married or parents, and would not necessarily know how to parent a child. So when those children grew up, not having been properly raised themselves, they wouldn’t know instinctively how to raise their own children. This was especially painful when it came to expressing love to a child. If I was not told by my parents how much they loved and cherished me, I wouldn’t necessarily realize how important it is to say that to my own children. This has the potential to create a vicious circle of children and adults who are unsure how to express love and receive it. Unless the chain is broken, this basic and necessary need goes unmet, for generations.

This got me thinking about my own life experience. My mother was a warm and affectionate Mom, and could tell us often each day how much we were loved and cherished. Even amid scolding for misdeeds and mishaps, we knew of Mom’s affection. My father was different. He was a military man. He enlisted in the Canadian navy during World War II. When the war was over, he re-enlisted in the RCAF and remained a uniformed airman all my growing up years.

I never heard him say to me, “I love you.” This does not upset me, because I knew that he loved me. I accepted that he just couldn’t say it. Lots of men are like that. They feel awkward about raw, positive feelings. I didn’t follow Dad into the military, but I think it’s an environment that might seek to “toughen you up”. I imagine that declarations of fondness would be frowned upon in those ranks. You might be quick to tell your sweetheart that you love her, but you wouldn’t dare say it to another guy. Not even your son. At the Mass when I was ordained a priest, at the kiss of peace Mom slobbered all over me. Dad shook my hand. But there were tears rolling down his cheek. I knew he loved me.

Getting back to the conversation with my Indigenous friend. He suggested that it would be a small but helpful action on my part, as a bishop, to encourage people to tell one another how much they love each other. Especially in the family. We all need that assurance that we are loved, that others truly care about us. So here’s my line: if you love someone, tell them up front, to their face. Don’t hesitate; don’t be shy about it. It will make their day, and it most likely will make yours as well.



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