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When the unexpected's the norm

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By Hans Thomas

“Behind every lasting marriage stands a wise woman.” The quotation is from Ephraim Kishon, but that didn't stop Judith Andreae from applying it to herself, with satisfaction and to the applause of others. She was the lead speaker at a

weekend workshop on “Daily Problems of a Young Family” held at an Opus Dei-directed conference center in outside Cologne. Mrs. Andreae, a mother of three, describes herself as a “family manager.” On the side she does landscaping for others....

Dad's advice and Mom's execution

Mrs. Andreae explained that a family's daily life more or less takes care of itself, save when the unexpected crops up. Then, as the 40 young couples looked over the Andreae's shoulders, they were treated to a description of what it's like when “a real tornado hits the family.” Meanwhile, heard but not seen, children of all ages were playing elsewhere in the building.

When the “unexpected becomes the norm,” not unlike a permanent emergency, dad must advise and mom execute, commented Mrs.

Andreae. Through their complementary roles the parents try to avert the imminent chaos. This view was greeted by a round of applause, whereby participants showed their concurrence with Kishon's claim.

In another presentation, Professor Reinhold Ortner, a psychotherapist from the University of Bamberg, spoke of how to learn from experience....He remarked that three basic things contribute to family happiness: seeing life as a calling, respecting everyone's vital "space" and inducements for spiritual life. Then he asked those present to ask themselves, "When as a child was I most happy?" He shared with the audience a reply from one of his college students, Sylvia: "It wasn't the gifts I received that made me happy but rather spending time alone with my father."

Before hitting rock bottom

The favorite speaker was Christa Stewens, who spoke on “Mothers on the ladder to professional success.” She manages to acquit herself on the home front while serving in two political positions in the Bavarian Province: Deputy to the Parliament and Secretary of State. No liberated woman or radical feminist, she married at 19, before finishing high school. An experienced mother of six, she was first named to a parents' advisory group at her children's school, soon thereafter ascending to be its president. Encouraged by the Bavarian Social Christian Union party, she thereafter won a seat to Munich's municipal council and in 1994 was elected Deputy. However, she always made it clear that her public role was conditional to the time and attention she owes her family.

In 1998 she was called to enter the Bavarian Cabinet. Since then she enjoys signing herself on official papers as “housewife.” When bureaucrats insist on her official title, she ultimately gets her way by writing, “housewife.” A female colleague once asked her how she lived; to which she answered, “Like a normal woman. And you?” A bit disconcerted but candidly her interlocutor replied, “The truth is I live like a man.”

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