

# WHAT IS THE DOMESTIC CHURCH?

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*“Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society.”*

– Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 292

The term “domestic church” describes the identity and mission of a Christian family. Its roots are scriptural. As Supreme Knight Carl Anderson notes in his book *A Civilization of Love*:

Today, it is increasingly common to speak of the family as the “domestic church.” This is not merely rhetorical. The ideal of the family as a domestic church goes back to the Old Testament. It was stated most simply and eloquently, perhaps by Joshua: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” It was developed in the New Testament: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.”<sup>1</sup>

In Ephesians 5:21-35, St. Paul exhorts husbands to love by a new measure, as Christ loves the Church. This new dimension of love indicates that Christian marriage, by virtue of Christ’s saving grace, now participates in Christ’s union with the Church. This participation makes the Christian family a manifestation of the communion of the Church.

These scriptural passages, as well as others that speak about the sacredness of marriage and the home,<sup>2</sup> prompted further reflection by the Church on the meaning of a Christian family as a domestic church. The early Church Father St. John Chrysostom taught that the name domestic church means much more than the space in which the early Church or the family prayed. He explained this, saying, “make your home into a church” where “all, even the smallest ones, must feel actively committed to seeking the message of the Word of God and to living it together.”<sup>3</sup>

Moving forward to 20th and 21st centuries, while the domestic church was referenced by the Second Vatican Council,<sup>4</sup> Blessed Pope Paul VI<sup>5</sup> and Pope Benedict XVI<sup>6</sup>, it was St. Pope John Paul II who significantly deepened the understanding of the Christian family as a domestic church. Pope Francis has further developed John Paul II’s understanding with his spirituality of the Christian family in *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*).

In his major papal work on the family, *Familiaris Consortio* (*On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*), St. John Paul II writes, “The family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God’s love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His bride.”<sup>7</sup> In that same text, he famously sums up the mission to Christian families with the exhortation, “Family, become what you are!”<sup>8</sup>

According to St. John Paul II, a family is called to become a domestic church, which is the communion of life and love founded upon the sacrament of holy matrimony. In a unique way, the family as domestic church participates in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Jesus Christ and his Church.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, the Christian family becomes “one heart and mind” in faith (Acts 4:32).<sup>10</sup>

### **The Sacrament of Matrimony**

Marriage is the life long union between a man and a woman established by God and ordered toward the love of the spouses and the procreation and education of children.<sup>11</sup> As St. John Paul II frequently noted and Pope Francis reaffirms, marital communion is above all characterized by the total gift of self that husband and wife give to each other.<sup>12</sup> This total self-gift protects the love of spouses from slipping into selfishness and egoism that can all too easily creep into the best of marriages and destroy spousal unity.

Marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman is a sacrament.<sup>13</sup> As a sacrament, married love is taken up into God’s trinitarian love.<sup>14</sup> The couple’s bond is indissoluble, which means it lasts “until death do us part.”<sup>15</sup> The spouses are also given graces to love each other sacrificially and generously, like Christ loves them. They image, or mirror, in their communion the love of the Trinity and Christ’s love for the Church (Eph 5:21-35). “Christ’s love becomes the form of married love.”<sup>16</sup>

The sacrament of marriage itself — with its responsibilities of totality, fidelity, indissolubility, fruitfulness and the reflection of God’s love — is the first gift the family brings to the world and the family’s primary way of evangelizing as a domestic church. The Christian family’s three-fold mission of priestly, prophetic and kingly service is an unfolding of this sacramental mission and communion.

### **Priestly Mission of the Domestic Church**

The priestly mission of the family is lived by praying together and offering the family’s daily life and activities to God. Members also live their priestly mission by receiving the sacraments as a family.<sup>17</sup> When families pray, they welcome God into their home and embrace the new manner of love found in Christ that helps them overcome their struggles, doubts, fears and uncertainties.

Prayer is the act of directing one's mind and heart to God with the help of the Holy Spirit because "we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom 8:26).<sup>18</sup> Through reading the word of God together, families grow in their faith and increase their devotion for God. Through sharing the very personal act of prayer together, families become unified in trust and love. They begin to see their loved ones "with the eyes of God," seeing "Christ in them."<sup>19</sup> They develop a supernatural outlook on life that increases joy and sustains them through difficult moments. As Pope Francis says in *Amoris Laetitia*:

Family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith [in Christ's death and resurrection]. A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle. With a few simple words, this moment of prayer can do immense good for our families.<sup>20</sup>

The act of prayer extends beyond the words said together; the verbal prayers tune the mind, the will and the senses to the peace that comes from God, a peace that should carry through all activities and moments of daily life. When times are difficult, family members can maintain their peace by transforming annoyances and hardships into a quiet prayer offering of love for God and for one's own family, in union with Jesus on the cross.

These daily offerings should be united with the perfect offering of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. When the gifts are being brought forward at Mass, give over sufferings to the Lord for him to transform them into an ever greater love, sealing anew the marriage bond:

The family's communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist. ... Jesus knocks on the door of families, to share with them the Eucharistic supper (cf. Rev 3:20). There, the spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross. ... For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a "domestic church."<sup>21</sup>

Families should also seek to strengthen their domestic church by frequently receiving the sacrament of reconciliation together. In a certain sense, just like in the Eucharist, every experience of reconciliation by spouses is like a renewal of wedding vows because it removes sin and releases the graces flowing from the sacrament of marriage.<sup>22</sup>

### **Prophetic Mission of the Domestic Church**

As family members grow in prayer and trust, a domestic church becomes a sanctuary from the hardships of the world. Within this sanctuary members are able to live out the prophetic mission of the family, which is announcing together the word of God and witnessing to the faith.<sup>23</sup> Their witness of faith begins with spouses offering witness to each other and continues as parents witness to their children.

It is to their parents that children first look for guidance and explanation; because of this, parents have a grave responsibility to teach them about what is true. They must share with them not only academic and practical knowledge, but also provide solid religious catechesis centered in the reality of Jesus Christ and opportunities for practicing virtue. As Pope Francis reminds us, “Parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately.”<sup>24</sup>

Created by God, children are deserving of all parental efforts to develop in them good sense, faith and virtue — traits which will aid them in understanding their vital importance to the community and their essential role in bringing about the kingdom of God in the world. As St. John Paul II said, “It is important that the ‘communion of persons’ in the family should become a preparation for the ‘communion of Saints.’”<sup>25</sup>

However, a family’s witness to the faith should not stop with one’s children. It must also become a witness for the whole world. We have an obligation to set the light of faith on a lampstand (Mt 5:15). In fact, “the work of handing on the faith to children ... helps the whole family in its evangelizing mission. It naturally begins to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle.”<sup>26</sup>

Many people fear that by talking about their faith they may be unfairly imposing upon someone or appearing as proud. However, evangelizing is not imposing but rather sharing with another a great good that has been discovered. It is natural to want to do this with a good that will enrich their lives. But even better than just sharing the faith through conversation is also accompanying someone along the road of holiness, so that the truth is conveyed with love.

## **Kingly Mission of the Domestic Church**

The mission of the family is to charitably serve the Church and the world; it is a kingly mission because it mirrors the service of Christ the King.<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis has memorably called the Church “a field hospital after battle”<sup>28</sup> and said the family “has always been the nearest hospital”<sup>29</sup> to care for all those who are physically and spiritually wounded, especially those who are poor and outcasts to the larger society. A married couple is called to be a reflection “of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, an embrace” and to join “God’s dream” by building “a world where no one will feel alone.”<sup>30</sup>

Pope Francis is calling for families to live together in charity. Charity is not just a form of dutiful service meeting the immediate physical needs of people. It is also the joyful love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, which seeks to heal human misery.<sup>31</sup> “This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support,” Pope Benedict explained.<sup>32</sup>

Families can live this divine charity in many ways. They can join one of the Church’s charitable organizations, participate in local parish ministries or go on a mission trip together. Most of all, family members can practice charity within the walls of their home through hospitality and attentive care to others, because it is true that charity begins at home. With its first principle of charity, the Knights of Columbus offers many methods of living this virtue in practical ways. The possibilities are endless. Families should discern with God what he creatively wants them to do.

When families live charity within their homes, their parishes and the broader culture, they begin to build up what Pope John Paul II called “the civilization of love.”<sup>33</sup> By doing this, families become not just a “saved community” blessed with grace — they participate in the mission to evangelize all people as a “saving community.”<sup>34</sup> It is this civilization of love that the world desperately needs:

Where is that person of whom the saints said, “The glory of God is man fully alive?” Where is the person created and redeemed by Christ? Where is the person who joyfully lives the vocation to love to which humanity has been called by Christ? Where can we find this “new” Adam in the day-to-day world around us? It is the responsibility of Christians to show the world this new Adam. They will do so by their actions, by their attitudes, and by their influence. But above all, they will do so by their love.<sup>35</sup>