

Renewing Catholic Family Life Dr. Greg Popcak

Jesus is standing at the door of your home. Do you know how to let him in?

Generally speaking, Catholics tend to think of family life as a distraction from living a holy life. We think Church is the place we encounter Christ and our parish or community is where we do ministry. Home is mostly just in the way.

But that isn't how it's meant to be. The Church says that your family is meant to be a "domestic church." Assuming your participation in the sacramental life of the church, your home is meant to be the primary place you encounter Christ in your day-to-day life. Your family life is an actual ministry of the church (*Familiaris Consortio* #39).

That probably sounds great in theory, but what does it mean in real life?

In July, 2019, my organization, CatholicCounselors.com, hosted the *Symposium on Catholic Family Life and Spirituality* at the University of Notre Dame. Sponsored by the Our Sunday Visitor Institute, Holy Cross Family Ministries, and the McGrath Institute for Church Life, the *Symposium* was a gathering of over 50 theologians, social scientists, and pastoral ministry professionals who have an international reputation for their writings on family and faith. The *Symposium's* mission was to develop a vision for renewing Catholic family life. To accomplish our goal, we focused on four critical questions.

1. Are Catholic families meant to relate differently to each other than our non-Catholic counterparts? If so, how?
2. Because most of what we think of as "Catholic spirituality" is drawn from the monastic and clerical traditions, it doesn't fit neatly into messy family life. What would an authentic, family-based spirituality actually look like?
3. Most of our ministry efforts as a Church are spent chasing after sheep that should never have been lost in the first place; kids raised in Catholic households. How can Catholic families do a better job of practicing intentional discipleship at home and raising the next generation of intentional disciples?
4. How can Catholic families become what the Church says they're meant to be; namely, the primary engines of evangelization and outposts of positive social change?

Remarkably, these questions have never been explored in a systematic way in the history of the Church. Although--largely thanks to St. John Paul--Catholicism has a well-developed theology of family, what that theology actually means, practically speaking, to the average Catholic family hasn't been developed in any meaningful way.

As a result of the discussions that resulted in response to these questions, we were blessed to be able to emerge from the Symposium with a new vision for both Catholic family spirituality and family ministry. This vision reflects both an authentically Catholic theology of family and the best insights the social sciences have to offer regarding what it takes to create a truly healthy, dynamic, faithful family life and pass our faith on to our kids. Likewise, instead of saying “every family has to do X,” the model offers a framework that allows families to bring their own unique experiences, life, and culture to bear on it. In a sense, the model allows every Catholic family to sing from the same sheet of music, even though you might play the song on different instruments and arrange it and harmonize with it in your own unique way.

We call this vision, the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*. Other authors, most notably, Cardinal Marc Ouellet in his book, *Divine Likeness*, have argued that Catholic family life is liturgical. Our model builds on this idea and describes the different rites (i.e., building blocks) that make up the liturgy of your domestic church.

The word “liturgy” means “public act of worship.” To say that your family life is liturgical means that when your family is filled with sacramental grace and united in the mission of sharing Christ’s love with each other and the world, every part of your family life becomes a way to worship God and experience him more meaningfully. *The Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* helps families experience everything we do—from changing diapers, to making meals, to paying bills, to maintaining the home and raising kids, and all the rest—as a little way of holiness and an *actual ministry* that builds the Kingdom of God.

In the next few columns, I’ll unpack how you can live this vision in your home. For now, just know that Jesus is knocking on your door longing to be invited to be part of your family. Invite him in. Let him show you how to transform your messy family life into a dynamic domestic church. Learn how at our Facebook Discussion Group: *CatholicHOM—Family Discipleship*.

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