



# COLUMBIA

## Online Edition

## THE CHURCH OF THE HOME

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In his apostolic exhortation on the Christian family in the modern world, St. John Paul II explained that “future

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evangelization depends largely on the domestic church” (*Familiaris Consortio*, 65). Like a cell or small organ of the body, the family plays a vital role within the body of the Church, and in this sense it is called the domestic church or the “Church of the home.” The vitality of the Church as a whole, like that of society, can be gauged in large part by the health of its families.

Nonetheless, survey data, including the results of a recent study, indicate that a large percentage of Catholic families in the United States do not attend Mass or practice their faith regularly — even though families are more likely to do so than others (see sidebar).

As we anticipate the World Meeting of Families and the first visit of Pope Francis to the United States, it is an opportune time to reflect on the practice of faith in our own families as it relates to the life and mission of the Church.

### ‘BECOME WHAT YOU ARE’

One of John Paul II’s most famous statements in *Familiaris Consortio* is an imperative: “Family, become what you are” (17). At first, these words may seem paradoxical; how can something *become* what it already *is*? To

answer this question, let's take a moment to reflect on the nature of the family.

Marriage and family serve society by giving birth to, raising and educating the next generation of citizens. In other words, the family is the fundamental unit and generator of civilization and culture. This has been the family's role from time immemorial.

The family is also where the child learns that he or she is loved, that his or her life has infinite value. It is where the child comes to have a personal and social identity. Who I am and how I understand myself depends largely on my family. Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once observed that the child becomes self-aware, and aware of the goodness of existence and reality as a whole, through the smile of his mother. In a real way, the child is given a world by that smile.

If this is true for the child, a related truth follows for parents. In conceiving new life, a husband and wife become father and mother (and later, grandfather and grandmother). These are moments in which one's personal identity evolves, matures in love and finds fulfillment. When a man sees the eyes of his father looking back at him from the face of his child he becomes aware of his place in the course of generations. When a woman sees the face of her husband in her child, she knows how profoundly indissoluble the marital and familial bonds really are.

In the hustle and bustle of our contemporary society, we easily forget to take notice of these basic human experiences. Becoming what we are begins in pausing long enough to take *notice* of what we are, and then acting upon it.

It is only through Christ that we can become fully who we were created to be, and it is through the motherhood of the Church that the family can "become" what it *is* most completely.

The family serves not only to pass on civilized society and to nurture personal and social identity, but also to open God's kingdom to its members, especially children and the surrounding community. The Christian faith fills our personal identities with an infinite depth and richness. We come to know not only that our parents and family love us, but also that our origins extend beyond them. We discover that our family is part of the whole family of God and that our love is an image and participation in God's love.

In this way, the family is a primary object of the Church's evangelizing mission. Through her sacraments, her tradition and teaching, her preaching of the word, the Church draws her families, just as a mother draws her children, to herself.

## **THE MISSION OF THE FAMILY**

The family is not only *evangelized*. It is also an *evangelizing* community (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 50-54). As Pope Francis noted in an April 2014 address, "the work of evangelization begins at home." For Catholic families, evangelization begins in infancy, with baptism, and then with raising that child in the faith.

Concluding his October 2013 address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, Pope Francis said, "It is important that parents be the first catechists, the first educators of the faith in their own family by their witness and by their word."

Spouses help and support each other in the faith and in their responsibility as the first educators of their children. It is a difficult task, since our contemporary culture offers us an almost infinite number of choices and distractions, which can bury and suffocate our deepest longings under a deluge of superficial "satisfactions."

But as St. Augustine said, every human heart is restless until it finds and rests in God. It is therefore essential that spouses and family members ask themselves and each other, *what* is life really about? What do we *really* long for? What do we *really* aspire to be? How can we be more completely what we are?

In helping our children to answer these questions, we may observe how our outward physical actions shape our inward dispositions. This is why we genuflect and kneel at Mass, cross ourselves in prayer, touch relics and sacred objects, and use holy water to bless ourselves and others. By acting on our faith and love, we increase and strengthen these gifts and make them real to ourselves and our children.

When parents teach the faith to their children, they in turn become more faithful. Children are naturally religious; they are filled with an awe-inspiring religious imagination and can often ask the most profound (and sometimes difficult) questions of faith. In teaching our children, we teach ourselves. And in evangelizing its own members, the family will evangelize the larger community. People will see the loving relations of the Christian family, and this will inspire in them a thirst to know how they too can live in such a community of love. Priests and religious will also see the love of the family and be reinforced in their own faith.

Of course, civil society is not a family, but it is or should be a community founded on principles of shared culture and history, broader bonds of friendship and empathy, and the common good. The family brings to civil society principles that it needs, such as the willingness to care about and sacrifice for others and for larger goods; to put one's talents and skills to work for the good of all; and to prioritize persons over things. A society in which these and similar principles operate is what John Paul II called "a civilization of love."

## KEEPING THE FAITH

There are a number of concrete, practical things that a family can do to fulfill its vocation as a domestic church.

*Go to Mass as a family.* Of course, every Catholic should attend Mass on Sunday and on holy days, but it is also important that families attend Mass *together* when possible. This is a special time of the week, when the members of the family can pray together and in union with the rest of the faithful in their parish. It is also important that children see their parents taking their faith seriously by regularly attending and praying at Mass.

*Frequent the sacraments as a family.* The same can be said with regard to the other sacraments, especially confession. Regular confession helps them to become accustomed to confessing their sins. When they see mom or dad enter the confessional, they recognize the virtue of humility and the need we all have for reconciliation. Children should also have the opportunity to witness baptisms and marriages, to participate in eucharistic adoration, and to prepare adequately for first holy Communion and Confirmation.

*Pray together as a family in the home.* The importance of family prayer cannot be overemphasized. Often we think it is sufficient to go to Mass on Sunday, but this can leave the children with the impression that the faith has little to do with the rest of their lives. The family cannot fulfill its role as the “domestic church” without regular prayer.

Usually, it is best to keep family prayer simple and brief. If it is too long, it will be difficult, given the realities of our lives, to keep up with it. In addition, small children have a limited attention span. Variety, therefore, helps to maintain interest. Sometimes we can do a family rosary; other times we can read from the Bible or pray the daily readings found in publications such as *Magnificat*. Other times, all we can do is a brief “goodnight prayer” as a family — perhaps an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be — along with intentions for the needs of society, friends, family members and ourselves. Whatever we do for prayer, consistency is crucial.

*Pray together as husband and wife.* A husband and wife can grow in faith together by praying together as a couple. Again, this does not have to be elaborate, but spouses should at the very least offer a prayer together before going to sleep at night. If business travel causes a separation, why not pray together by phone?

*Spend time and enjoy meals together as a family.* It is a sad fact that modern families are spending less and less time together. Even when they are all physically under the same roof, they are often individually absorbed in computers, television and other electronic devices. Various school, extracurricular and even parish activities, not to mention work schedules, can interfere.

It is important to slow down and notice each other. This takes time, and time without constant digital distractions. Try playing card or board games together, or going on walks or bike rides as a family. Most importantly, make sure to have meals together. Don't let your hectic schedules take away this precious time. It may not be possible to have a family dinner every evening, but there should at least be a consistent number of meals together each week.

The faith can never be inert or irrelevant to any aspect of life. If it is real, it insists on shaping every moment of our lives and every one of our actions. Following Pope Francis, we must continually ask ourselves, "How do we keep our faith as a family? Do we keep it for ourselves, in our families, as a personal treasure like a bank account, or are we able to share it by our witness, by our acceptance of others, by our openness?"

Taking up the Holy Father's challenge, we can really *become* what we *are*.

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