



Marriage and Family Life : The Domestic Church

Ecclesia Domestica

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Matthew 18:20

What is a "Domestic Church"?

"The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason . . . it can and should be called "the domestic church. It will be their task to foster among the faithful a lively sense of solidarity, to favour a manner of living inspired by the Gospel and by the faith of the Church,... a true source of light and a wholesome leaven for other families."

Familiaris Consortio, John Paul II, 1981

"A family (husband and wife) is our first community and most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The early Church expressed this truth by calling the Christian family a "Domestic Church" or "Church of the home".

Follow the Way of Love Pastoral Message of the U.S. Bishops

"There is one institution which cannot be replaced by anything else, which lies at the root of the happiness of mankind, of peace, progress and civilization: It is the family which is the first cell and the first center of life, the first home. The family is an image of God, of the Blessed Trinity."

Cardinal Joseph Cardijn

Jesus promised to be where two or three are gathered in his name (cf. Mt 18:20). We give the name church to the people whom the Lord gathers, who strive to follow his way of love, and through whose lives his saving presence is made known.

This marvelous teaching was underemphasized for centuries but reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council. Today we are still uncovering its rich treasure. The point of the teaching is simple, yet profound. As Christian families, we not only belong to the Church, but our daily life is a true expression of the Church.

Within the womb of the Christian family as "domestic church", husband and wife join together in a sacred labor of love that with their gaze on Christ's Mystical Body bonds them to a common spiritual and missionary purpose. Each Christian family is called to be a "domestic church". Pope Benedict XVI 11/1/10

Our domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united with and supported by parishes and other communities within the larger Church. Christ has called us and joined us to himself in and through the sacraments. Therefore, we share in one and the same mission that he gives to the whole Church.

We carry out the *mission* of the *church of the home* in ordinary ways when:

✦ We **believe** in God and that God cares about us. It is God to whom we turn in times of trouble. It is God to whom we give thanks when all goes well.

✦ We **love and never give up believing** in the value of another person. Before young ones hear the Word of God preached from the pulpit, they form a picture of God drawn from their earliest experiences of being loved by parents, grandparents, godparents, and other family members.

✦ We **foster** intimacy, beginning with the physical and spiritual union of the spouses and extending in appropriate ways to the whole family. To be able to share one's self – both good and bad qualities – within a family and to be accepted there is indispensable to forming a close relationship with the Lord.

✦ We **evangelize** by professing faith in God, acting in accord with gospel values, and setting an example of Christian living for our children and for others. And our children, by their spontaneous and genuine spirituality, will often surprise us into recognizing God's presence.

✦ We **educate**. As the primary teachers of our children, we impart knowledge of the faith and help them to acquire values necessary for Christian living. Our example is the most effective way to teach. Sometimes they listen and learn; sometimes they teach **us** new ways of believing and understanding. Our wisdom and theirs come from the same Spirit.

✦ We **pray together**, thanking God for blessings, reaching for strength, asking for guidance in crisis and doubt. We know as we gather – restless toddlers, searching teenagers, harried adults – that God answers all prayers, but sometimes in surprising ways.

✦ We **serve** one another, often sacrificing our own wants, for the other's good. We struggle to take up our cross and carry it with love. Our "deaths" and "risings" become compelling signs of Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection.

✦ We **forgive** and seek reconciliation. Over and over, we let go of old hurts and grudges to make peace with one another. And family members come to believe that, no matter what, they are still loved by us and by God.

✦ We **celebrate** life-birthdays and weddings, births and deaths, a first day of school and a graduation, rites of passage into adulthood, new jobs, old friends, family reunions, surprise visits, holy days and holidays. We come together when tragedy strikes and in joyful celebration of the sacraments. As we gather for a meal, we break bread and share stories, becoming fully the community of love Jesus calls us to be.

✦ We **welcome** the stranger, the lonely one, the grieving person into our homes. We give drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry. The Gospel assures us that when we

do this, they are strangers no more, but Christ.

✚ We **act justly** in our community when we treat others with respect, stand against discrimination and racism, and work to overcome hunger, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy.

✚ We **affirm life** as a precious gift from God, opposing whatever destroys life, such as abortion, euthanasia, unjust war, capital punishment, neighborhood and domestic violence, poverty and racism. Within our family, when we shun violent words and actions and look for peaceful ways to resolve conflict, we become a voice for life, forming peacemakers for the next generation.

✚ We **raise up** vocations to the priesthood and religious life by encouraging our children to listen for God's call and respond to God's grace. This is especially fostered through family prayer, involvement in parish life, and by the way we speak of priests, sisters, brothers, and permanent deacons.

No domestic church does all this perfectly. But neither does any parish or diocesan church. All members of the Church struggle daily to become more faithful disciples of Christ. We need to enable families to recognize that they **are** a domestic church. There may be families who do not understand or believe they are a domestic church. Maybe they feel overwhelmed by this calling or unable to carry out its responsibilities.

"There may be families who do not understand or believe they are a domestic church...Perhaps they consider their family too 'broken' to be used for the Lord's purposes. But remember, a family is holy not because it is perfect but because God's grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew every day on the way of love...Wherever a family exists and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing - not even divorce or death - can place limits on God's love." USCCB, Follow the Way of Love, pg. 5

Like the whole Church, every Christian family rests on a firm foundation, namely, Christ's promise to be faithful to those he has chosen. When a man and a woman pledge themselves to each other in the sacrament of matrimony, they join in Christ's promise and become a living sign of his union with the Church (cf. Eph 5:32).

"It is essentially a "joining" of the domestic church with Christ's Bride, the universal Church, both directed toward the building up of Christ's Mystical Body. In this sacred relationship between the Christian family and Christ's Bride, the vocation of Christian marriage blossoms to its fullest extent." Pope Benedict XVI

Therefore, a committed, permanent, faithful relationship of husband and wife is the root of a family. It strengthens all the members, provides best for the needs of children, and of a family, and causes the church of the home to be an effective sign of Christ in the world.

CATHOLIC CATECHISM
VI. THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

2204 "The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church." It is a community of faith, hope, and charity; it assumes singular importance in the Church, as is evident in the New Testament.

2205 The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation. It is called to partake of the prayer and sacrifice of Christ. Daily prayer and the reading of the Word of God strengthen it in charity. The Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task.

1655 Christ chose to be born and grow up in the bosom of the holy family of Joseph and Mary. The Church is nothing other than "the family of God." From the beginning, the core of the Church was often constituted by those who had become believers "together with all [their] household." When they were converted, they desired that "their whole household" should also be saved. These families who became believers were islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.

1656 In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica*. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are "by word and example . . . the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation."

1657 It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way "by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity." Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and "a school for human enrichment." Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous - even repeated - forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one's life.

1661 The sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life.

1666 The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called "the domestic church," a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity.

Questions for Reflection: *Individually and as a Couple*

- ❖ What are the threats to the hope and reality of a domestic Church in our home?
~How are we balancing time commitments to:
each other, our children, our jobs, and our community?
~Have our lives become fragmented?
- ❖ What is it in life that matters most to me?
~How, with whom—and when—shall I share my treasure?
~Do we as a family share what we treasure with other families?
- ❖ Reflect for a moment on your life as a couple/family.
~Do you recall a time when you felt God's presence in your couple/family life?
~Why do you think this was so?
~What was happening?
- ❖ Recall one or more instances where you experienced “the feeling of being in church”?
~Either in the home or outside of it. What was the outcome?
- ❖ Can you think of a pressure that has brought trouble to you as a couple or family?
~How did you deal with it? Alone or together?
~Did this bring you closer or drive you farther apart?
- ❖ How are we as husband and wife embracing our vocation and creating a firm foundation for our domestic church?

Spiritual Striving or Resolution:

What positive choices will we/I make, this week and through the month, to improve on how we/I use our/my time with my husband/wife and our family?

Think of a behavior or attitude you would like to change or improve.
How will I work on this attitude?

Be concrete as this is a starting point. (Write it down)

Prayer for a Married Couple

*O God, unite our hearts in the never-ending bond of pure love.
May our sacrament bring You happiness and may Your generous love
for us be returned to You, many times over.
May the peace of Christ live always in our hearts and in our home.
May we continue to have true friends who stand by us both in joy and in sorrow.
May we be ready and willing to help and comfort all who come to us in need,
and may the blessings promised to the compassionate someday be ours.
May we find happiness and satisfaction in our occupations.
May daily problems never cause us undue anxiety,
nor the desire for earthly comforts dominate our lives.
May You bless us with many more happy years together and may
You one day welcome us together into Your eternal kingdom.
Amen.*

~from "Prayer for Today," published by Leaflet Missal Co.~

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