

WE BELIEVE IN THE FAMILY: THE FACE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

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THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

In October 2015, the world's Catholic Bishops, along with invited religious and lay guests, met in Rome with Pope Francis in what is known as the *Extraordinary Synod on the Family*. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), much attention has been paid to the role of the family in the Church, and to the larger issues affecting the spiritual health of family life. The Council's universal call to holiness reserved a vital and particular role for the family of being "a very valuable witness to Christ before the world when all their life they remain attached to the Gospel (*Decree on the Laity*).” The Council declared the family so important that it “might be regarded as the *domestic church* (*Lumen Gentium*)”.

The Creed we pray at Sunday Mass affirms our belief that the Church, founded by Christ, is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” Together these four characteristics or “marks” of the Church express both her *nature* and *mission*. Following the Synod on the Family, I believe it would be useful to explore the deeper connection between the family's and the Church's way of being in the world through the idea of the family as *domestic church*, because, as Pope Francis said at the conclusion of the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in 2015, “Our families, our homes, are true domestic churches. They are the right place for faith to become life, and life to grow in faith.”

Our personal encounter with Christ begins in our families. A family that lives as domestic church nurtures and encourages each of its members to faithfully live out the Baptismal commission to holiness and to share in Christ's mission. But what does it mean for the Catholic family to *live as domestic church*? If the nature of the Church is to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, then shouldn't the family -- the *domestic church* -- share these characteristics in its own life, purpose, daily activities and relationships? Pope Paul VI (who was be Beatified at the conclusion of the Bishops' meeting) wrote in 1975 that “there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church.”

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE FAMILY IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

The modern Catholic family faces many challenges in a culture that has become ever more secularized, and in many places is hostile to the public expression of religious belief. I invite you to consider the following questions and reflect on them in your own family life. In this era when the family as a social unit is under attack from multiple quarters trying to redefine its nature, is it enough for the Catholic family to simply be a collection of baptized persons linked to each other by biology, to the Church by culture or habit, that may or may not attend Mass together? Or should the Catholic family exhibit an identity in the Church with its own integral unity, sanctity, universality and mission in the world?

The Church is One: The Family is Unity. In a 1981 encyclical, Saint John Paul II called the family a “community of life and love.” The purity of the selfless giving of love between husband and wife, and the protective, nurturing love of parents for their children is the heart of family unity that mirrors the Oneness of the Trinity and communion of the Church. Benedict XVI called the family “the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love.” The mutual acceptance and forgiveness natural to families reflects the charity and generosity of life to which Christ calls His Church. “The love that animates the interpersonal relationships of the different family members constitutes the inner strength that shapes and animates the family communion and community...The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion (St.JPII).”

The Church is Holy: The Family is a Community of Faith. The holiness of the Christian family derives from relationships that are loving, sanctifying, prayerful, sacramental, and that recognize the presence of God in their midst. The Catholic family is a community of faith when it responds to Christ's universal call to holiness. Families are holy when they pray together and "see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ (St.JPII)." Even the most ordinary activities of family life reflect "the Church's life and mission." One author has written: "[What] happens within the walls of our homes is no less sacred and holy than what happens within the walls of the parish church."

The Church is Catholic: The Family is Welcoming. The Church is said to be catholic (i.e. universal), because the way of Christ, which is the way of salvation, is open to all people through the Father's constant invitation of all-inclusive love. The Church stands as an open door on earth (Rev 3:3), welcoming anyone who seeks new life in Jesus Christ. The Catholic family expresses the openness of the Church by living charitably and showing hospitality. As a holy community united in faith, the Catholic family emulates the universal love of God (and the welcome of the Church to all humanity) by opening itself to others and witnessing to the intimate presence of Christ in the household.

Hospitality has deep roots the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Gospels give us many examples of Jesus teaching and preaching on the requirement that His disciples demonstrate hospitality. In our own time the family is a natural vehicle for manifesting the openness of the universal Church to all peoples. One blogger contributed this thought, "Regardless of what our homes look like or where they are geographically located, visitors should feel hospitality when they enter through our doors. Though they may not be familiar with the flow of our normal events, they should know one thing for sure...Christ is present."

The Church is Apostolic: The Family is a Witness to Christ. The Catholic family shares in the fundamental mission of the Church, given by Jesus to His Apostles: to proclaim the Gospel in the world. All members of the family are equally called to actively witness to God's infinite love by how they live in communion with each other and with those outside the family unit. "The Christian family is called upon to take part actively and responsibly in the mission of the Church in a way that is original and specific, by placing itself, in what it is and what it does as an 'intimate community of life and love,' at the service of the Church and of society (St.JPII)." The family is the center of evangelization because, by living as a united, holy and hospitable society, it "reflects the splendor of Christ in the world (Benedict XVI)." Pope Francis has also said, in continuity with his predecessors: "Christian families are missionary families, in their everyday life, in their doing everyday things, as they bring to everything the salt and the leaven of faith!" It is in the family's nature to want to pass on stories and traditions. The Christian family fulfills its apostolic mission by setting these stories in the context its relationship with Jesus Christ and the power of God's love at work in it.

THE CALL OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Like the Church, the family is called to unite, sanctify, welcome, share and evangelize. "[Every] home *can* transform itself into a little church. Not only in the sense that in them must reign the typical Christian love made of altruism and reciprocal care, but still more in the sense that the whole of family life, based on faith, is called to revolve around the singular lordship of Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI)." Of course no family is perfect. We all make mistakes; and living a devout Christian life can be difficult and demanding. With Christ at the center of family life, shining His light in the midst of its challenges, every household has the potential to be a ***domestic church***. Is there anything stopping your family?