

THE CARDINAL'S FORUM

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on "The Vocation & Mission of the Family"



remarks by

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In my reflections this evening on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and world, I would like to begin with a quotation from *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," which says: "The family is... the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state" (LG 9). In his 2006 document, "The Family in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*," Cardinal William J. Levada develops this point further when he says: "To see the family as the Church "in miniature" and to call the Church the "Family of God" are ideas that have been present from the early centuries of Christianity."

In both of these statements the vocation and mission of the family are intimately tied together. Simply stated, the vocation of the family is to be church; its mission is to pass on the faith, first to its members and then to those it comes in contact with. The mission of the family is the mission of the Church: "to make disciples of all nations." (White and Corcoran, *Rebuilt*, 39). The spread of the Gospel is not merely spatial (that is, spreading the Good News to all the corners of the earth), but also temporal, extended through time, that is to say, "generational." That's where the family comes in.

Parents are called to make disciples of their children. That cannot be done, however, if they themselves are not disciples. You cannot give what you yourself do not possess. You cannot simply sit back and let others do the work for you. Parents must be actively involved in the passing on of their faith. In her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (FID), Sherry A. Weddell laments the fact that so many of today's Catholics have been "sacramentalized" but not evangelized" (FID, 46). They have received the sacraments (often with little motivation and poor catechesis), but have not actually encountered the Lord. They do not possess what Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), "The Joy of the Gospel," places at the very heart of the new evangelization: "a personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus" (EG, 264). For this to happen, the process of making disciples must be more intentional than cultural (FID, 39).

If I may apply these words of Pope Francis to the family: Parents need to be “Spirit-filled evangelizers” who “pray and work” (EG, 262). They are to pray for the good of their family and work for the physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being of their children. The Lord expects nothing less from them. But how can this be if parents don’t see discipleship as a primary concern. If not, Weddell says: “Personal discipleship will inevitably be treated as a kind of optional accessory in a Catholic community where less than half are confident that they have a personal relationship with God and nearly 30 percent don’t believe in a personal God at all” (FID, 55).

Pope Francis, we might say, takes a “bottom up” approach to the family. He understands that the family is “the school for humanity” and, with John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation on the laity, *Christifideles Laici* (CL), maintains that the human person has an inherent social dimension and the married couple and family is “[t]he first and basic expression of the social dimension of the person” (CL, 40). He also recognizes that the family is made of weak human beings in need of help. For this reason, we can be relatively sure that the upcoming Synod of Bishops and the Pope Francis’s consequent Apostolic Exhortation will offer concrete suggestions and helps for the pastoral care of the family and its members.

The Pope has already encouraged parents to work things out as soon as possible after a flare up of anger. He speaks of the powerful effect of simple words like, “May I? Thank you, and Pardon me” (IL, 43). He tells parents to play with their kids, to openly display their affection for one another, and forgive each other so that no one ends up “isolated in the bitter broth of resentment.” He tells parents to kiss each other in front of their children as a witness of their love for one another, because “when they see that dad and mom love each other, the children grow in that climate of love, happiness and security.” (Zenit 8.4.15).

The vocation of the family, in other words, is to live in communion with one another. As the domestic Church and the Church in miniature, it is called to live the life of Christian *koinonia* or *communio*, the fellowship that marked the primitive Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42) and which has been highlighted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the magisterial teaching of Pope St. John Paul II. Two specific passages from the writings of the late pope point out the importance of the “spirituality of communion” for the Christian vocation and mission. In *Novo millennio ineunte*, his “Apostolic Letter on the New Millennium” (NMI, 2001), he describes the spirituality of communion as “...above all the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us” (NMI, 43). In an earlier document, *Vita Consecrata* (1996, VC), his “Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life,” he points out the intimate relationship between *communio* and *missio*. He says: “The life of communion in fact “becomes a *sign* for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ ... In this way communion leads to *mission*, and itself becomes mission,” indeed, “*communio begets communion*: in essence it is a *communio that is missionary*” (VC 46). The Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* reflects this sentiment when it says, “The actual ‘living out’ of family communion is a form of missionary proclamation” (IL, 48).

When applied to the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and world, it becomes clear that the family is called to live a life of communion and that this very call is of a missionary nature. To put it another way, Pope Francis's call to "missionary discipleship" expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 119-21) applies not just to clergy, religious, and those who are particularly pious and devout, but to all the baptized (EG, 120). The way this missionary spirit is expressed is by building community. The family should be the seedbed or greenhouse of missionary discipleship and living in a "communion of love," its primary goal and *raison d'être*.

To conclude, the Church is a pilgrim people and the family--- as the "domestic Church," the "Church in miniature," the "school for humanity" (GS, 2)--- is on a journey through time to a distant homeland. Families need wise, prudent, loving, and compassionate *accompaniment* on their journey. They may wander at times---sometimes for a long, a very long time---but they need guidance and direction, they need to be befriended and led. They need to be given hope that God's promises will be fulfilled, their wounds healed, and their destination well within reach. Most of all, they need to hear the message of God's mercy, since "all are in need of mercy," and especially since mercy is "the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ" (IL, 68).

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