

The Domestic Church

Juxtaposed with our previous discussion of distorted commitments to family life fueled by individualism and consumerism, Catholic social teaching asks people to consider carefully whether families promote or obstruct common welfare. This consideration invites Catholics to undertake a meaningful assessment of the way in which they personally balance individual, family, and social needs and goods. In balancing family needs and the needs of others in community, Catholics can be guided by considering the family as a domestic church. In its Second Vatican Council document on the nature of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the Church teaches that marriage is a holy state and that spouses with their children constitute an integral dimension of the universal Church. The relevant segment on marriage as domestic church reads as follows:

Finally, Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church, help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children. By reason of their state and rank in life they have their own special gift among the people of God. From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, 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.

Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect.¹

This section affirms several things about married persons. First, it recognizes that married life is holy in its manifestation of Christ's love for the Church. Second, it recognizes that holiness is a component of rearing children. Third, it recognizes that married life provides people with a special and unique gift, which is the procreation of children and hence the continuation of human society. As the first preachers of faith to their children, parents have a deeply important role in fostering not only the holiness of one another as spouses but also of their children as parents. As such the family has an obligation to be church to its members. However, the family has obligations to recognize its interdependence with others in society as well.

The Church affirms the interdependence of all persons in its *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, in which it states the following about the relationship between individuals and society:

One of the most striking features of today's world, and one due in no small measure to modern progress, is the very great increase in mutual interdependence between people. Genuine sororal and fraternal dialogue is not advanced by progress of this sort, however, but takes place at a deeper level in a community of persons which calls for mutual respect for each one's full spiritual dignity. Christian revelation greatly fosters the establishment of such

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, §11.



communion and at the same time promotes deeper understanding of the laws of social living which the creator has inscribed in people's spiritual and moral nature.

Some recent pronouncements of the church's teaching authority have dealt at length with Christian teaching on human society. The council, therefore, proposes to repeat only a few of the more important truths and to outline the basis of these truths in the light of revelation. Later, it will deal with some of their implications which have social importance for our day.

God, who has a parent's care for all of us, desired that all men and women should form one family and deal with each other as brothers and sisters. All, in fact, are destined to the very same end, namely God himself, since they have been created in the likeness of God, who "made from one every nation of humankind who live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). Love of God and of one's neighbor, then, is the first and greatest commandment. Scripture teaches us that love of God cannot be separated from love of one's neighbor: "Any other commandment [is] summed up in this sentence: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:9–10; see 1 Jn 4:20). It goes without saying that this is a matter of the utmost importance to people who are coming to rely more and more on each other and to a world which is becoming more unified every day.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus, when praying to the Father "that they may all be one, even as we are one" (Jn 17:21–22), has opened up new horizons closed to human reason by indicating that there is certain similarity between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of God's children in truth that God has wanted for their own sake, they can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving.

The fact that human beings are social by nature indicates that the betterment of the person and the improvement of society depend on each other. Insofar as humanity by its very nature stands completely in need of life in society, it is and it ought to be the beginning, the subject, and the object of every social organization. Life in society is not something accessory to humanity: through their dealings with others, through mutual service, and through fraternal and sororal dialogue, men and women develop all their talents and become able to rise to their destiny.²

The family may be thought of as a corporate identity: one body comprised of several individuals. As a corporate identity, it must look after the individual people who comprise it, but it must at the same time function as a contributor to society such that it seeks *as a family* to open itself to the greater society as a whole. For a family's strength and sustainability simultaneously derive from and contribute to the strength and stability of society. Just as the person and the advance of society depend upon one another, families, like persons, also contribute to and depend upon the advance of society.³

A domestic church is church at the family level. This means everything that a church provides at the social level, a family provides to its members at the family level. If we remember that the spouses are the ministers of the sacrament of matrimony to one another—that they are the priests of their marriage—it

² *Gaudium et Spes*, § 23–25.

³ The Vatican document *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (1983) is key in explicating both the freedoms and responsibilities of the Catholic family.



becomes clearer that marriage partners have a religious vocation in their life as spouses and parents. In their religious vocation, spouses act as a microcosm of the Church. We might then ask, what does the Church do? It strives to meet the spiritual needs of its members, to spread the good news to others, to meet the needs of the poor and underprivileged, to be a moral exemplar to human society, and to be a faithful pilgrim in this world in preparation for the fullness of the kingdom of God. To these tasks, families are called as domestic churches.

In fact, when we begin to consider families as domestic churches, we can see very clearly that there is no substantive separation between the family as church and the gathering of the Christian community as the universal church on any given Sunday. For church is not comprised of walls and buildings but of people. The moral life of the church is not comprised of dusty textbooks but of the lives of human beings striving to live out their faith despite struggles, limitations, and imperfections. When we remember that the earliest Christian churches were in fact house churches—there were, of course, no actual church buildings when Christians first began worshipping together—it becomes clear that the Church does not make the people but rather that the people make the Church. Families, when they strive to become sacred covenants of love and commitment both in themselves and in their relationships with others, are the Church in the daily interactions of human beings.

Application to Family and Marriage Today

To be a domestic church in the contemporary culture is to be countercultural. It is to go against the tide of consumerism and individualism in favor of solidarity with the human community. It is to see one's family not myopically as a source of personal satisfaction but as a unit within society that has a responsibility to society as well as rights within society. The family unit is affected dramatically by a range of laws that govern taxes, welfare, education, health care, reproductive technologies, and more. As such, families have an enormous stake in society. Families need to cooperate with one another in ensuring laws that make it possible for families and individual family members to flourish. Moreover, the Church has an obligation to support families in their quest for justice, peace, and social welfare by its support of people in their respective roles as spouses, parents, children, and caregivers.

When trying to determine if one's family acts as a domestic church, the following questions might prove helpful. While they may be most relevant to Catholics who identify with the notion of family as domestic church, they may prove useful for anyone seeking to analyze the social awareness of his or her own family experience.

- Does my family act as the domestic church through sharing the gospel message with others in my community?
- Does my family share private resources (including time and labor) with our community?
- Is my family a location for the personal, and particularly spiritual, flourishing of each of our members? Does it make me myopically inward-focused, or does it support my work as a Christian?
- Does my family help to meet the needs of all its members, such as aged or lonely relatives and extended family in financial straits?



- What specifically has my family, as a family, done to support the vulnerable members in our community?
- What specifically has my family done to care for environmental welfare?
- Are the habits of consumption of my family excessive or abusive? Why and how might I or we correct them?
- Is my work or employment consistent with the values of Catholic social teaching? Is the education of the children in my family consistent with these principles?
- Does my family work together collaboratively with other families in the Church or in the community at large?
- Does my family actively seek to manifest covenant love and dignity?
- Do we model sacramental love as spouses and parents for others in our community?

If the Church is the people of God, then the Church is wherever the people are and in whatever circumstances they are. As with every other dimension of family life, it is up to the family itself to claim its rights and responsibilities to be a domestic church just as it is possible to ignore these rights and responsibilities. Naming one's family a "domestic church" is an invitation to realize the fullness of a marriage's spiritual potential, both within the marriage and as an agent within society. The choice remains with the couple to strive toward this realization or to yield to more commonplace models of modern marriage, which demand little vision but reward even less.

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