



EVANGELIZING FOR A DOMESTIC CHURCH

FOUR STRATEGIES FOR SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

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Anonymous, after Jacques Callot; *Holy Family* (17th-18th c.);
de Young Legion of Honor Museum (San Francisco). Image
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Pope Francis's call for an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 2014 on the pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization signals increasing unified attention in the Church to the pastoral care of families and the role of families in evangelization. As Fr. Frederico Lombardi, the director of the Holy See Press Office, explained in his statement following the announcement of the upcoming Extraordinary Synod, "As we address various pastoral issues, it is important that we move forward *in full communion with the ecclesial community*."

To prepare for this assembly and to ensure that the Church does indeed proceed in full communion with the ecclesial community, Pope Francis requested the insight of the world's bishops through a pre-synodal questionnaire. One part of this questionnaire asks about the understanding of the very identity of the family: "How can an awareness of the family as the 'domestic Church' be promoted?"

To grasp the magnitude of the goal proposed by the question, it is important to first consider the challenge of correctly understanding the concept: "domestic Church." The typical American family today often appears all but domestic. From soccer practice and music lessons to spouses traveling for days or weeks on business, the family appears to be a nucleus of blood relatives, but without quality time together outside of occasional family dinners and participating in the Sunday liturgy. What is more, each person's image of "Church" is influenced by his or her subjective experience of the Church. When one's experience of the Sunday liturgy and religious education

lacks the qualities of beauty, a call to conversion, and authentic friendships with laity and clergy, one's perception of the Church becomes distorted. Yet, the future success of the family, I believe, depends upon individual families—our neighbors, fellow parishioners, and yes, our own families—intentionally and concretely taking up the call to be a domestic Church.

I would like to propose strategies to contribute to the formation of the family. How a parish and its diocese accomplish its sacramental preparation will decide whether the image of the family, as the domestic Church, will be built and sustained or distorted and lost. Recalling St. John Paul II's words, "the future of evangelization depends in great part on the Church of the home."¹ What follow, therefore, are four strategies to promote the sacramental formation of the domestic Church.

1. EVANGELIZE AND BE EVANGELIZED

The theme of evangelization is at the core of Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. The call for every Christian to engage in evangelization is repeated consistently throughout the document—the word *evangelization* itself is used no less than 110 times. Written 38 years after its ancestral exhortation, Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Francis' presentation of evangelization might be summarized by one word in the exhortation's title: *joy*. The task of evangelization, the Holy Father suggests, is “the source of authentic personal fulfillment,” and he characterizes the evangelist as possessing “delightful and comforting joy ... even when it is in tears that we must sow.”² Evangelization, Pope Francis indicates, is also essentially *new*: “Every form of evangelization is always ‘new.’”³ These two fundamental qualities of evangelization, joy and newness, also find concrete expression in the life of the family.

The family, by its very nature as a community of persons, is essentially evangelistic. St. John Paul II highlights this character imprinted upon the structure of the family in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*: “To the extent in which the Christian family accepts the Gospel and matures in faith, it becomes an evangelizing community.”⁴ Moreover, he exhorts the family to recognize the transforming power of the Gospel when infused into spirit of the family to define and renew relationships between its members. Quoting Paul VI, John Paul II explains the effects of transmitting the Gospel through family life:

The family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family, which

is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood of which it forms part.⁵

We cannot fail to recognize the role of sacramental preparation implicit in these words. Catechesis for sacramental preparation cannot simply stop at forming the baptized as “participants” in the Sunday liturgy; it must also train them as *protagonists* in the ongoing mission of the Church, that is, in bringing the joy and newness of a Gospel-centered life into all areas of daily activity and all sectors of society. This task will not be easy, and it will require that we move beyond the perception that catechesis stops once children have reached “adulthood” in faith after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation and only takes place in the Sunday school classroom. Evangelization requires one to be continuously evangelized throughout one's lifetime.

Parents have, therefore, an irreplaceable role to play in the catechesis and evangelization of their children. Consequently, forming parents to be evangelizers of their children will be crucial for forming families into the domestic Church. What is more, formation for the role of parents—made mandatory in some dioceses at the moment of their child's Baptism—can be a moment for parents to be re-catechesized and evangelized through the catechesis of their children. This mutual giving and receiving of the Gospel among family members will improve and promote a growing

awareness of the family as a domestic Church. The parish faces a strategic challenge in providing this critical adult faith formation, but also an opportunity: should parents recognize the Gospel's transforming

power upon the interior life of their families, adult faith formation will grow for the *joy* and *newness* it cultivates.

2. NARRATIVE PEDAGOGY FOR CATECHESIS

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds preachers that the Church acts as “mother” for all Christians: “The Church is a mother, and . . . she preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that the child trusts that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit, for children know that they are loved.”⁶ Motherhood is an irreplaceable role within family life, nurturing all its members and the family spirit, thus enabling joy to well up and overflow. The prophet Isaiah recalls the image of motherhood, an intensity of love unsurpassed by any other human love, to convey the incomparable surpassing love of God:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion
for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.⁷

The pearl of a mother's love is due in part to her sensibility to recognize the needs of her children. The Church, as mother of all Christians, possesses the ability and

the call to reflect this sensibility through the formation she provides. Sacramental preparation that truly reflects this attentive love cultivates the gift of motherhood for families to embrace and practice.

Effectively transmitting God's patient, merciful love to children and adolescents who possess constantly evolving psychological and emotional abilities is indeed one of the challenges that catechists and parents alike must tackle. Religious education guides and workbooks convey the narratives of Sacred Scripture and the precepts of the Christian life, making classroom instruction feasible for most adult volunteer catechists. Yet, no teaching guide will replace real “incarnational” evangelization: the parent's or catechist's sincere conviction and action to witness to God's patient, merciful love for each particular child.

Teaching methods in sacramental formation must correct the misperception that the core message of catechesis is a series of rules, rather than a love story of God's mercy—told lovingly. Because the sacraments for which

children undergo preparation restore and replenish sanctifying grace, conforming them to Christ, a virtue-based pedagogy that teaches children through a narrative structure may prove more successful: their actions retell, either accurately or inaccurately, the Gospel narrative of God's love. German theologian Johann Baptist Metz advocates for a return to a narrative, "apologetic" structure for transmitting the faith such as that employed by the early Christian communities, writing:

In my view, introducing a notion of remembering salvation narratively is so far from signaling a regressive blurring of the problem that it really offers for the first time the possibility of giving expression to salvation in history—history that is always a history of suffering—without mutual truncation.⁸

A Gospel-centered narrative approach to catechesis considers the narratives of Scripture not simply for their historical relevance (for example, the role of Old Testament Israel in preparing the way for Jesus Christ, or the epistles of St. Paul in the formation of the early Church), but as possessing foundational significance for every person's daily life. Scripture asks those who encounter it how its narratives signify the reality of their lives and invites them to encounter Jesus Christ along the way. This power of the Gospel narrative to give Christ to those who hear it is especially important today in reaching and transforming young people in urban centers who are bombarded with a plethora of conflicting narratives for understanding their lives. As *Evangelii Gaudium* emphasizes:

What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being

formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities.⁹

Walking the streets of New York City, I find a sea of mixed messages on social norms and values threatening to engulf adolescents. A narrative approach to catechesis can rescue adolescents from drowning under a wave of social influences competing with religious values by giving them purified scripts for interpreting the truth of their actions, Gospel-enriched expressions to counteract wound-inflicting social scripts.

Narrative-based catechesis simultaneously promotes the family as the domestic Church. Stories are both a result and rich source of family unity! When these stories are filled with Gospel values, children will be guided to imitate these narratives. Moreover, telling stories still remains a popular and enjoyable activity during family gatherings.

3. CULTIVATION OF PRAYER AND RITUAL

Perhaps the most effective element of sacramental preparation for the formation of the domestic Church is the cultivation of family prayer. The beauty of family prayer has the power to captivate and witness. As a graduate student, I often found the example of two of my instructors—married with six children and each holding Ph.D.s from Boston College—the most effective catechesis. One evening, after enjoying a family dinner with this lively domestic Church, I watched as they gathered to pray Compline—an image that, years later, remains both a sweet memory and a call. St. John Paul II considers the relationship between family prayer and the sacraments in *Familiaris Consortio*, writing:

Family prayer has its own characteristic qualities. It is prayer offered in common, husband and wife together, parents and children together. Communion in prayer is both a consequence of and a requirement for the communion bestowed by the sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony.¹⁰

John Paul II draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between family prayer and the sacraments, characterized in both cases by *communion* in prayer. The family—a community of parents, children, and siblings—and the Church—the community of the baptized—each possesses a structure defined by relationships. It should be no

surprise that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* dedicates one of its four parts to Christian Prayer. Prayer remains an essential condition for the Christian life, a life in Christ oriented toward the community.

How, though, do new families implement the practice of family prayer when they themselves have never been taught? Engaged couples attending marriage preparation courses today often have little or no experience praying together, yet believe that prayer would strengthen their relationship and possess a sincere desire to learn and to develop a common prayer life. Many couples are familiar and comfortable with particular Christian prayers (for example the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Glory Be); yet they lack the experience of praying in community for very simple, practical needs. Intimidated by their inability to offer “profound” words, their prayer life may be neglected.

The domestic Church, however, thrives on prayer—simple, practical prayer—that makes the actions of family members intelligible through the lens of faith. St. John Paul II explains the nature of this prayer:

Family prayer has for its very own object family life itself, which in all its varying circumstances is seen as a call from God and lived as a filial response to His call. Joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, births and

birthday celebrations, wedding anniversaries of the parents, departures, separations and homecomings, important and far-reaching decisions, the death of those who are dear, et cetera—all of these mark God’s loving intervention in the family’s history. They should be seen as suitable moments for thanksgiving, for petition, for trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common Father in heaven. The dignity and responsibility of the Christian family as the domestic church can be achieved only with God’s unceasing aid, which will surely be granted if it is humbly and trustingly petitioned in prayer.¹¹

St. John Paul II begins the above explanation on the content of family prayer with the simple expression, “joys and sorrows,” two categories encompassing a multitude of experiences every family encounters daily. This family prayer is by nature childlike, meaning-filled, and practical. Such prayer is, as Doctor of the Church St. Thérèse of Lisieux eloquently describes, “a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”¹² Sacramental preparation and catechesis should promote the domestic Church by cultivating simple, Christ-centered community prayer—whether in classroom or parish settings—that exhibit these same qualities.

In the task of cultivating family prayer, the Church’s rich tradition of ritual practices should not be neglected. American culture has shied away from visible signs of ecclesial unity, favoring instead individual expressions of faith and relationship with Jesus Christ. Ritual, however, gives visible, concrete expression to the unity of the ecclesial community. Ritual is found in its richest form in the liturgy. The liturgy’s long-standing Eucharistic Prayers and doxologies, communal responses, and uniform prayer postures provide the visible expression to excite worship within the community. The ritual aspect of liturgy, when thoughtfully engaged, makes possible the Second Vatican Council’s call for “full active participation of all God’s holy people in these liturgical celebrations.”¹³

The family, I suggest, would grow further into its call to be a domestic Church through embracing ritual in its expression of family life. Incorporating ritual into family prayer will vary between families, but practices might include mandating family dinners each week, holding frequent celebrations of faith-centered events (baptismal anniversaries, for example), or praying Compline together. The reintroduction of ritual provides visible expression of the family’s communal faith, while increasing the awareness of and gratitude for the Church’s long-standing ritual-filled traditions.

4. THE “ENCOUNTER” PARADIGM

The “Pope Francis effect” sparking worldwide media attention can be attributed, I believe, in part to the Holy Father’s genuineness. This holy man authentically offers us a striking model of evangelization in his encounters with Christians and non-Christians, healthy and ill, children and adults, each met and accepted in a spirit of *joy*. Pope Francis’ example offers us a “theology of encounter”: for the Holy Father, every encounter marks a unique moment when God’s love is communicated between persons and through the persons.¹⁴ The Church’s missionary renewal, Pope Francis explains, depends upon one’s response to embrace daily encounters:

It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbours or complete strangers. This is the informal preaching, which takes place in the middle of a conversation, something along the lines of what a missionary does when visiting a home. Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.¹⁵

The family, as the domestic Church, can and should be thoughtfully considered as subjects called to embrace this encounter paradigm. The Second Vatican Council calls attention to a unique role for families to witness the faith

before other families: “Families too will share their spiritual riches generously with other families . . . This the family will do by the mutual love of the spouses, by their generous fruitfulness, their solidarity and faithfulness, and by the loving way in which all members of the family assist one another.”¹⁶ St. John Paul II highlights the missionary nature of this call:

Animated in its own inner life by missionary zeal, the church of the home is also called to be a luminous sign of the presence of Christ and of His love for those who are “far away,” for families who do not yet believe, and for those Christian families who no longer live in accordance with the faith that they once received. The Christian family is called to enlighten “by its example and its witness . . . those who seek the truth.”¹⁷

The family, as the domestic Church, takes on its full image when its mission coincides with the mission of the Church to evangelize. St. John Paul II explains, “the family’s sharing in the Church’s mission should follow a community pattern: The spouses together as a couple, the parents and children as a family, must live their service to the Church and to the world.”¹⁸ Returning to the first strategy, the family fulfills its calling as the domestic Church when it evangelizes and is, in turn, evangelized.

Sacramental preparation seeking to strengthen the family as the domestic Church cannot neglect the pedagogical implications of an encounter paradigm for evangelization. Catechesis that does not communicate a catechist's own deeply-held conviction of God's love may quickly become "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."¹⁹ How, then, will success be measured? The encounter paradigm, I believe, will be clearly measured through the fruitful outgrowth of relationships in formation settings, both friendships and discipleships.

Additionally, marriage preparation should not neglect the importance of an encounter paradigm's influence on engaged couples. Although these couples may come to marriage preparation unformed or ill-formed in faith,

they still possess an incredible *hunger* for meaning in their journey of love. Many hold a sincere desire for friendships with other engaged couples and married couples with whom they will walk their journeys of marital love. As more attention is given to the family as the domestic Church—an evangelizing community—families shall realize that by embracing their vocation to be a living community of *joy*, they will simultaneously be a light for others.²⁰ Pope Francis writes, "Finally an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization."²¹

EVANGELIZING FOR A DOMESTIC CHURCH

Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* could not, I believe, have arrived at a better moment. The universal Church is experiencing a hunger for evangelization. Since the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness for all the baptized, a growing number of pontiffs have laid within their rich teachings (particularly *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and now, *Evangelii Gaudium*) the doctrinal and paradigmatic foundations for evangelization that can feed this universal hunger for the evangelization of the family, that is, the domestic Church. Dioceses and parishes now face the challenge of putting these paradigms into practice. As Pope Francis has urged:

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their

level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.²²

In this month's Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, the bishops of the world directed their attention to the evangelization of families. Dioceses and parishes may do the same by considering what diocesan and parochial structures and programming can effectively build up the domestic Church. In this effort, I have suggested four strategies for the evangelization of the family, for forming the family for the task of evangelization, and for evaluating the fruitfulness of such work.

Sacramental preparation—programs in catechesis, adult faith formation, and marriage ministries—should be attentive not only to catechizing children but also to forming parents to be catechists in the home so that the entire home can be infused the joy of sharing the Gospel. Sharing this joy of the Gospel, I have also argued, might be most effectively achieved through a narrative pedagogy that lovingly conveys the Gospel as a love story of God’s mercy. However, transmitting the narrative of God’s loving mercy would be incomplete without teaching families how to respond to this love in humble, trusting, and childlike prayer. Finally, I suggest that the family is naturally suited to and thus should be formed according to the paradigm of encounter that we have seen so beautifully modeled by Pope Francis, who joyfully meets Christ within and brings him to everyone he encounters. These strategies can help bring

families to a joyful encounter with the saving power of Jesus Christ that will in turn transform them into a light for others, witnesses to the joy of the Gospel.



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NOTES

1 John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio* [FC], §52.

2 Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG], §10.

3 Ibid., §11.

4 FC, §52.

5 Ibid., citing *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §71.

6 EG, §139.

7 Is 49:15.

8 Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (Crossroad, 2007), 193.

9 EG, §74.

10 FC, §59.

11 Ibid.

12 Thérèse of Lisieux, *Manuscripts Autobiographiques*, C 25r, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2558.

13 Second Vatican Council. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*), §14.

14 Pope Francis’ theology of encounter, described in this context, would significantly resemble the writings of St. John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body*.

15 EG, §127.

16 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), §48.

17 FC, §54.

18 Ibid., §50.

19 1 Cor 13:1.

20 Cf. Mt 5:14.

21 EG, §24.

22 Ibid., §120.