

CATECHETICAL THEOLOGY

BY TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY

THE HABIT OF
WORSHIP, THE
DOMESTIC
CHURCH, AND
THE PEDAGOGY
OF CULTURAL
CATHOLICISM

III



Our Lady of Mount Carmel;
image courtesy of the author



The Church, for years, has emphasized the gift of family life in the work of catechesis. John Paul II in *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) writes:

The family's catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense, irreplaceable. . . . Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. (§68)

Too often, though, the term domestic Church (implicit in the late pontiff's comments on family catechesis) is employed with the purpose of either blaming or producing guilt in those parents who are the "primary catechists" of their children. They hear that they should be the source of faith in their household. They know that they are more important than the parish's sixth grade catechist. But, they don't know how to assume this responsibility within the home.

Perhaps, the problem is that our approach to catechesis is forgetful of the subtle ways that one may be formed in faith within the domestic sphere. Since he was less than five months old, my son has ended each evening by kissing an icon of Jesus Christ in the arms of the Blessed Virgin. At this stage in his life, he made no conscious decision to adore in worship an icon of Christ. But now, for this toddling two-year-old, an evening *cannot* conclude without the performance of this ritual action. The adoration of this icon has become a habit within our household, a practice that we perform in the same way that we brush our teeth or make coffee. It is the integration of religious practice within the schedule of our lives—an organizing of our activity around the worship of the Word made flesh. And this practice has changed my own life of prayer.

I find myself in the evening longing to kiss this very same icon, praying all the while for those students who are in the midst of suffering from loneliness or depression. Through this simple ritual practice, joyfully integrated into what it means for us to be a family, my own life of prayer has been transformed. My son's insistence on this practice has been the source of this conversion, of this evening offering of love, which has become defining of my life of prayer.

The centrality of catechesis in the domestic sphere does not thus mean that the dinner table becomes a religious education classroom. That the living room must re-orient itself toward the seriousness of religious discussion. Instead, the family catechizes insofar as religious practice permeates domestic life, becoming part of the "habits" that make up what it means to belong to this family. There is a grand playfulness in teaching a two-year-old to make the sign of the Cross not simply in the baptismal font at church but also in the bathtub at home.

Of course, there is a risk that some approaches to the New Evangelization in the Church today denigrate (whether aware of it or not) this holistic and pedagogically-sound method of passing on faith within a family. These methods seem to emphasize that it is not the habit of worship that ultimately matters as much as the experience of falling in love with Jesus Christ. That if the former comes before the latter, then what is the purpose of such worship? That the era of "cultural" Catholicism (as lived among families) has passed. Now everything must be intentional. Everything must be chosen.

Such presumptions, while well-intentioned, risk denigrating the gift of domestic and cultural Catholicism alike. The habit of worship is "evangelizing" because it creates within the family a new way of life. Even if this habit is initially performed in a perfunctory manner, it gradually permeates the culture of the family, disposing

the child and parents alike toward the gift of worship. This habit inscribed in the culture of that family does not simply disappear, even if the child or parents one day grow weary of performing this practice.

In this way, we need strategies for the New Evangelization that are ultimately about forming habits of worship both within the domestic sphere and beyond it. That is, evangelization must be fundamentally about the creation of specific kinds of cultures, which are always generated through the habits of practice. As long as there are families, who have received their faith from those who have come before them (even if this faith was not passed on perfectly well), then cultural Catholicism is necessary for a vibrant, engaged Church. Inculcating habits of worship within the domestic sphere is the precise way that a form of cultural Catholicism receives new life within the Church.

Thus, in terms of family catechesis, one is not simply concerned with forming parents in making sure that they can explain perfectly well doctrinal distinctions to their children (though, this would be valuable). Rather, parishes need to invite new parents to consider those tender, joy-filled ways that domestic life itself can be filled with moments of divine worship. And these parishes need to provide spaces where the fruits of this domestic and cultural Catholicism can flourish in the public sphere. In other words, there is something deeply evangelizing (and perhaps deeply fun) about an annual event that includes a procession with the Blessed Virgin Mary and a carnival that comes along with it. Such moments of cultural Catholic identity can, if used well by catechists, become a source of renewal of family life as well.



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