The Domestic Church: The Church in the Home—Rediscovering Who We Are
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My mother died in 1986, but she is still a steady presence in my life. In the middle of my sometimes heady theological writing, I hear her voice summoning me to be more realistic. For example, in preparing something on the experience of the domestic church, I came across this statement in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which draws from other documents: “The Christian family constitutes specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church.” (n. 2204)

I know how she would react to this statement. “Did the people who wrote these words ever live in a family? Do they know about kids who cry and fight with each other? Do they know about barking dogs and husbands with exasperating habits? Do they know about bills to pay, laundry to do, meals to prepare, and schedules to coordinate? You call this a church?”

Her point is well taken. If there truly is a domestic church in Christian families—and I do believe that there is—it is alive in the rough and tumble of family life as it is genuinely lived, not as we might idealize it. We need not abandon the idea of families forming domestic churches, but we do need to be more precise about what we mean about that identity.

Two sentences in the General Directory for Catechesis sparked my own thinking and reflection on the identity of Christian families as domestic churches. The Directory reads: “The family is defined as a ‘domestic church,’ that is, in every Christian family the different aspects and functions of the life of the entire Church may be reflected: mission; catechesis; witness; prayer etc. Indeed in the same way as the Church, the family ‘is a place in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends.’” (n. 255; citation from Evangelii nuntiandi, n. 71)

These words from the General Directory indicate that the family, if it is to be a true domestic church, must embody and reflect the essence of the life of the Church overall. And three words capture that essence: word, sacrament, and mission. There are many ways to see and understand the life of the Church, for example, her origin in the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord and the binding power of the Holy Spirit that sustains her. In our ordinary experience, however, we live out our lives in the Church through word, sacrament, and mission. If this is so, then an important question emerges for our understanding of the domestic church. How do word, sacrament, and mission shape the Christian family and so make it a domestic church? If we can answer that question, we will be able to specify and concretize the Christian family as a domestic church and help to make it something realistic and attainable.

The Word of God in the Family

For most of us, the family is the place where the word of God is first proclaimed, received, and studied. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium) declares that “parents...are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children.” (LG, 11) Ideally, a family would regularly read the Bible together, for example, a short selection before the evening meal. Most often, however, the word is proclaimed much less formally by telling the story of Jesus and Mary and the saints, as it is embedded and celebrated across the liturgical year, for example, at Christmas time and in Holy Week.

Once proclaimed and received, that word is also assimilated and studied but not in an academic way. Formation in the word of God, as the General Directory describes it is “…a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing and daily than structured into periods.” (n. 255) That description, I believe, realistically reflects the way families live their faith. And if the word has a place in the family, it is probably around the kitchen table. Still, despite the informality of family life, parents can appropriately foster their family’s contact with God’s word through the deliberate and regular reminders about the word of God that they offer to family members. This is the form of their proclamation of the word.
Catechesis is a more explicit and deliberate exposure to the word of God and its implications for living. As such, catechesis belongs to the whole Church, and so also in special moments it belongs to the domestic church. This happens, for example, when parents and others teach young children how to pray, or when they educate their moral conscience in the context of decision-making, or when they help prepare them to receive sacraments of Penance, Eucharist, and Confirmation. The domestic church collaborates with the local faith community or parish in fulfilling its catechetical responsibilities to assimilate and understand the word of God.

The domestic church does not have limited concerns bounded by the walls of its home. The domestic church shares the expansive vision and direction of the entire Church. In relationship to the word, this means that the word of God cannot be simply contained within the family. The family must be in service to bringing the word to the world. In other words, evangelization is an essential ingredient of the domestic church as it is for the Church overall. In the memorable words of Pope Paul VI, “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize...”¹ This is no less true of the domestic church, which must be ready through witness and explicit proclamation to alert the world to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the family is a cult-like cell for proselytizing. Rather, the family in its words and actions, in its hospitality and its service, makes its faith transparent to a waiting world so deeply in need of its savior. Serving food to the poor and decorating the house for Christmas are very different activities, but both are rooted in Jesus who saves us and both make him known to the world. In various ways, the domestic church brings the word of God to the world.

The Sacraments of God in the Family

> The Sacrament of Marriage at the service of communion

The sacrament of marriage is the foundation of the domestic church. The sacrament that joins a man and a woman in a life-long and indissoluble union that generates new life is the beginning and ongoing sustaining force of the church in the home. The sacrament of marriage has that power, because it is, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church describes it, one of the sacraments at the service of communion. “Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God.” (n. 1534)

The sacrament sustains the union of husband and wife, so that their marriage can foster communion, the union of God’s people in knowledge and love that has its roots in the most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And communion is the hallmark of the Church which we believe and know to be “in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men...”² So, man and woman joined in the sacrament of matrimony serve communion in their very own family and enable it—by God’s grace—to be a domestic church. And beyond their own particular family, they contribute to communion in the whole Church and, ultimately, in the world.

> The domestic church brings its members to the Church for sacraments

The domestic church brings its members to the Church for the celebration of the sacraments. Parents, for example, bring their children for Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, and Penance. Not only do they bring their children and so initiate them but they continue to bring them, so that they can fully live the sacramental life of the Church.

That same domestic church pays attention to the admonition in the Letter of James: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:14) So, the domestic church brings its ailing members forward for the Anointing of the Sick. And in the final stages of our earthly life, the domestic church calls for the last

¹ Evangelii nuntiandi, n. 14.
² Lumen gentium, n. 1.
sacrament, Viaticum, the Eucharist given as the food of travelers who pass over to eternal life. For these sacraments, often it is the turn of the children to call for the sake of their parents.

Although a vocation to priestly service and the sacrament of Holy Orders is a grace God gives to an individual, the domestic church serves as a place of preparation and formation for that calling. Similarly, the domestic church encourages and forms its members who are called to live out their Baptism in consecrated or vowed life.

> The domestic church is where sacraments are lived out

Sacraments are not merely ritual events celebrated in a moment. They are encounters with the living God manifested in the mystery of Jesus Christ. And those encounters continue beyond the ritual moment, because they initiate us into a new way of living. The domestic church is a notable place where the sacraments are lived out. Several examples can illustrate this truth.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks about living out the sacrament of Baptism in this way: “It is here [in the domestic church] that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the *priesthood of the baptized* in a privileged way ‘by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity.’” (n. 1657)

Similarly, when a family returns home from the celebration of the Eucharist, they are summoned to live out the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ made present in the Mass and which they carry within themselves in virtue of their Holy Communion with him. For those who belong to a family, the primary locus where the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ is lived out can only be the domestic church.

Again, in a similar way, when family members have celebrated the sacrament of Penance and have encountered the merciful forgiveness of God, they not only live gratefully because of God’s mercy but they are also summoned to extend that mercy to others (see Matthew 18:23-35). Again, the primary place where family members will live out the gift of the sacrament of Penance with its dimensions of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness will be the domestic church.

> The extension of sacramental life in the worship of the domestic church

The sacramental life of the Church finds an extension in what can appropriately be called the liturgy of the domestic church. The family as domestic church is or certainly ought to be a praying community. In its prayer, the domestic church extends the official public worship of the whole Church. Again, this extension of sacramental life and of official worship can take several forms in the domestic church.

The ordinary and common prayer of the domestic church may well be prayer at mealtimes, at night, and possibly in the morning. Other forms of prayer can be important expressions of the liturgy of the domestic church. Devotional prayers, such as the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, have been an important part of many family traditions. The rediscovery of the Liturgy of the Hours as the official daily prayer of the Church for the entire Church can lift the level and quality of prayer in the domestic church and link it with the Church universal.

The domestic church provides a place of preparation for and assimilation of the Church’s liturgy by offering an opportunity for silence and personal prayer. It is no small task in many households to create and sustain—even for a moment—silent or quiet spaces, but it can be done. This allows hearts to be open to what the Church’s liturgy will offer and to receive more personally what has been celebrated.

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3 Citation within the quotation is taken from *Lumen gentium*, n. 10.
4 In a very carefully crafted teaching, Pope Paul VI accords primacy to the Liturgy of the Hours for family prayer but also extols the value of the Rosary prayed in families. He writes: “But there is no doubt that, after the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the high point which family prayer can reach, the Rosary should be considered one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite.” *Marialis cultus: For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1974, n.54.
Finally, the domestic church extends the experience of the Church’s sacraments and liturgy by dedicating sacred space in the home and venerating the sacramental images that recall the story of our salvation and the grace that is ours through Jesus Christ. The presence of the saints, the friends of God, and of the angels, his provident emissaries, finds a fresh reminder in images that decorate the home.

**The Mission of the Church Alive in the Family**

The mission of the Church is her holy purpose which the Lord Jesus entrusted to his bride. He gives the Church the great commission to bring the Gospel to all people, to baptize them, and to make them his disciples. And he assures his Church that as she carries out this mission, he will be present to her to the end of the age, that is, to the end of time. (See Matthew 28:18-20) Because the domestic church reflects the reality of the universal Church, the domestic church shares in the mission. We have already seen some aspects of the domestic church living out the mission given to the Church by Christ. Still, it is worthwhile to recall how the family moves beyond itself as a domestic church in mission.

From the very beginning believing families “were islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.”⁵ That presence has been, since the beginning, an evangelizing presence and mission. This witness has never been more important than today. Here is the full text from the *Catechism* that explains the domestic church and its place in the world: “Christ chose to be born and grow up in the bosom of the holy family of Joseph and Mary. The Church is nothing other than ‘the family of God.’ From the beginning, the core of the Church was often constituted by those who had become believers ‘together with all [their] household.’ [Acts 18:8] When they were converted, they desired that ‘their whole household’ should also be saved. These families who became believers were islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.” (n. 1655)

The mission of the Church cannot be fulfilled unless men and women who are called to special service respond to their vocation. Parents in the domestic church have a special role to play in the discernment and encouragement of vocations. Again, the *Catechism* speaking of parents says: “They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child, fostering with special care any religious vocation.” (n. 1656)

The domestic church can fulfill the mission by being an agent of charity, justice, reconciliation, and peacemaking. In a particular way, the care of the poor ought to become a central and abiding concern for the family that seeks to live out its mission as a domestic church. One of the final blessings in the marriage ritual expresses this aspect of mission clearly: “May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world so that the afflicted and the needy will find in you generous friends, and welcome you into the joys of heaven.”⁶ Finally, the domestic church fulfills its mission through the more general work of service and, within that, the particular service of hospitality. The family as domestic church opens its doors to those who need to share in its life. The *Catechism* speaks of this service of hospitality in this way: “Many remain without a human family, often due to conditions of poverty. Some live their situation in the spirit of the Beatitudes, serving God and neighbor in exemplary fashion. The doors of homes, the ‘domestic churches,’ and of the great family which is the Church must be open to all of them. ‘No one is without a family in this world: the Church is a home and family for everyone, especially those who ‘labor and are heavy laden.’” (n. 1658)

**Conclusion**

The domestic church really and truly is an instance of church. It participates in those basic and constitutive elements of the Church—word, sacrament, and mission. The experience of a domestic church obviously looks and feels different than an experience of church in a parish, a diocese, or at the level of the Church universal. That difference, however, does not signal less importance. The domestic church, for most of us, has provided the doorway and the foundation for our participation in the Church in her larger dimensions. The domestic church has also provided us with the place where we live out our faith most directly day-to-day and most intensely in the rough and tumble of ordinary family life.

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⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1655.