

The Family as the Sanctuary of Life

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In *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II wrote "the family... by its nature is called to be the "sanctuary of life" (*Gospel of Life*, #11). What does this mean? It means adults, especially parents, have a mission in the world.

Ephesians 3:14-15 gives us the first key to understanding. "I bow my knee before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named." Scripture says God is the original family of Persons, the family whose life is love. He saves us by transforming us into family, His family. Since we imitate God, God intends us to save others in the same way He saves us. This is why John Paul II constantly stresses the importance of the family, going so far as to say, "the future of the world and the Church passes through the family" (*The Christian Family in the Modern World*, #75). Both the destiny of the natural order and of the supernatural order depends upon the correct functioning of each individual family.

This is not surprising. Scripture begins with the story of marriage and family in the story of Adam and Eve, and ends with the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in the book of Revelation. Adam and Eve are in the image and likeness of God precisely because they are a communion of persons commanded to "be fruitful and multiply." God is fruitful, the source of all existence. Man is called to be fruitful in the material order. Some think the Fall resulted from sexual sin. It did not. The command to be fruitful and multiply is given in Genesis 1:28; Adam and Eve don't disobey until Genesis 3. Fruitful sexuality is part of God's divine plan for us, we would have the gift and duty to "fill the earth and subdue it" even if mankind had never fallen.

Noah's story reiterates the point. Upon leaving the ark, God commands Noah three different times in fourteen verses to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 8:17, 9:1, 9:7). In fact, this command is so deeply bound into the text that it constitutes part of the covenant between God and man. Likewise, when God changes Jacob's name to Israel, He commands Israel to "be fruitful and multiply." (Gen 35:10-11). This fruitfulness is key to Jeremiah's vision of salvation, wherein Christ establishes His Church (Jer 23:3-6).

When the first human couple fell into sin, the harmony of all creation shattered. God, the Original Family, responded by establishing His family on earth, the Chosen People. From among His family, He chose a daughter of Israel, created her sinless as He created Adam and Eve sinless, and set before her the choice: will you marry into the Original Family? At her "yes," the Son of God took on flesh, becoming the Bridegroom to all of humanity (John 3:23-30). Through the wedding ceremony of the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, that is, the Paschal Mystery, He created His Bride, the Church. Now, through the washing with water and the Word which joins us to the Bride, we are each made a spouse to the Bridegroom.

Sacrament means "mystery." Marriage is the only sacrament named in Scripture (Eph 5:32). Every sacrament reflects an aspect of our marriage to the Bridegroom. Baptism is the wedding ceremony to the Spouse, it establishes our newlywed relationship with Jesus. No marriage remains newly wed, every marriage must grow, become strong, mature. Confirmation grants us access to the power, the grace, which matures our marriage to Jesus. Reconciliation is the renewal of marriage vows after we have committed adultery by choosing to love a created thing more than our Spouse, it reestablishes marital harmony after we have sinned. Eucharist is the Flesh of the

Bridegroom entering the flesh of the Bride, impregnating us with life - it is the consummation of our marriage to God. In Holy Orders, God sends His Son to prepare the Wedding Feast. In Anointing of the Sick, the Bridegroom tends to His Beloved, healing her physically, and finally bringing her home to the Father's house after living a full honeymoon here on earth.

Thus, though the Eucharist is the heart of all the sacraments, marriage is the form. Every sacrament gains its proper meaning only through the proper understanding of marriage. Because the graces of every sacrament come to us through Jesus' Bride, our Mother, the Catholic Church, the Church is the source of all Christian Faith and the source of life. Catholic culture is the source of all human culture, the Catholic family is essential to the culture of life. Through the Church and the sacraments, God enmeshes us in a web of family support - He intends us to be saved through family precisely because He is salvation and He is Family. If we are to live eternally with Him, we must understand this relationship. We must restore health and stability to the family.

With this understanding, we can easily see why Catholics have always called the family, "the domestic Church." Indeed, Aquinas considered the ministry of parents to their children to be equal to the ministry of priests. Thus, within our families, we as parents have a priestly, a sacred, role (*The Christian Family in the World*, #38), and the family in turn is both sanctified by and sanctifies the Church (*The Christian Family in the World*, #55). Just as the priests guard the sanctuary of the Church, so parents guard the sanctuary of the home. Consider the sanctuary - it is a place which admits nothing unclean. We do not have Internet connections, CD players or televisions playing in our sanctuaries. Our tabernacles are not on the corner of First and Main, they are

sequestered from the world. We approach the sanctuary in order to gain relief from the world, to be apart from the world, to rest, to gain strength for the struggle we carry out every day in the world. This is the meaning of family as sanctuary of life. It is a safe harbor where we can rest and be revived. "The family is indeed sacred: it is the place in which life - the gift of God - can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed..." (*Centissimus Annus* 39)

So, how might we make our families what they are called to be? First, clean the sanctuary. Keep computers, televisions and stereos in public areas and out of bedrooms, monitor every Internet connection. Strictly budget the amount of time children spend in front of the television, or consider throwing the television out entirely. Monitor music selections and discard inappropriate selections. Ban MTV. Ban *Cosmo*, *Vogue* and like publications. Get *National Catholic Register*, *Lay Witness*, and other Catholic publications and build Catholic beauty. We are the parents - it is our duty to do this.

Reduce the busy-ness of life. Voluntarily reduce the number and/or intensity of individual or "me" activities. Ban labor-saving devices as gifts. Instead, give coupons redeemable for a share in the labor. Give self, not things. Two-parent families: consider having one parent stay home or work only while children are at school.

Embrace and nurture Catholic cultural traditions within the family. Restrict Sunday and holy day activities to Faith-related events. Celebrate each child's baptismal day and name's saint feast day with *more* energy than the birthday. Make martyrs' costumes for Halloween, put up Christmas trees during Christmas season, not Advent. Build generosity with a family volunteer activity (Habitat for Humanity, assisting elderly,

etc.). Discover and use the Catholic culture of your ethnic background. Give your children the gift of another sibling. Raise another child, either by adoption or by natural birth.

Practice the Faith more vibrantly. Schedule a monthly family confession time and holy hour. Consecrate your family to the Sacred Heart, venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary, pray the rosary as a family. Attend Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday and welcome the new Catholics at the reception afterwards. Get an adult grasp of the faith through Bible studies and encyclical studies. Promote NFP in your parish. Learn to pray Liturgy of the Hours. Cultivate devotion to particular saints through family novenas. Take holy days off from work and school (e.g., Good Friday, Ascension Thursday). Teach children about "offering it up" (redemptive suffering).

Collaborate with people outside the home, especially other Catholic families. Doctors, nurses and medical professionals, organize informational talks for local pro-life Christian pastors who don't understand that hormonal contraceptives cause abortion. Mothers, encourage each other to challenge your OB/GYNs on the subject of contraception. Help an expectant mom practice this post-partum conversation, perhaps as part of the baby shower. Dads, learn the arguments against contraception and then challenge your Christian co-workers, friends, neighbors and relatives to move away from contraceptive practice and respect their marriage instead. Be a prayerful family presence at the abortion mill. We cannot change the culture of death unless the family changes. Let us start with our own.