

The Catholic Family

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in Heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ~ Ephesians 3:14-19

IN THE LATTER PART of the twentieth century, a breakdown in the family occurred that had not previously been experienced. Divorce rates, which had been roughly stable except for a brief period after World War II, began rising and are more than twice as high as forty years ago. Many millions of children are victimized by the break-up of their parents' marriages, and themselves grow up wary of committed relationships. Each new break with the law of God has brought additional havoc to the family. Not only divorce, but also contraception, cohabitation, and abortion have devastated marriage and the family. A huge variety of social pathologies exist that seem to rise as the number of intact, stable, two-parent homes falls. And, although children may manage to develop into healthy, happy adulthood, more who might have done so, do not. Yet there is a better way to create a home and raise children, to avoid these tragedies and rebuild the foundation of human society.

What a Catholic Family Looks Like

In God's plan, the family is a community, founded

upon the marital consent of the spouses, and the children they bring into the world or adopt. Marriage exists for the good of the spouses and for the procreation and education of the children with which God blesses them. The education and nurturing of their children is the right, responsibility, and privilege of parents. With this wonderful privilege comes accountability to God for its responsible fulfillment.



Let the little children to come unto me, late 19th century print

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The Catholic family, where the parents have the awesome responsibility for sharing the first words and examples of faith in the family members, is called a “domestic church.” The apostles speak of the nature of the relationship that should animate the members of this domestic church. Husbands and wives are to be “*subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Eph 5:21). Wives are to “*be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning ... but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.... Likewise you hus-*

bands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pt 3:1-4, 7). Wives are expected to be “well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (1 Tm 5:9-10). Fathers are reminded not to “provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4) “lest they become discouraged” (Col 3:21), while children are instructed to “obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph 6:1) and to “make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God” (1 Tm 5:4).

The ideal and goal that is described in Scripture is one of family harmony and gentleness, mutual self-giving out of love of God, parents devoted to their children and children obedient to their parents, a warm welcome to the home for others, and service to those most in need in the community.

The relationship between husband and wife in a Catholic marriage is given supernatural life by the graces of the sacrament of Matrimony. Their love and respect is mutual, and they give themselves unreservedly to each other in a bond so strong that it enables weak human creatures to sustain the relationship despite all hardships. The children that come forth from their mutual self-giving are welcomed as gifts from the Creator.

As a communion of persons, the Catholic family reflects the union of the Holy Trinity, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and seeks to follow the

example of the Holy Family of Nazareth. The practice of prayer, reception of the sacraments, mutual and repeated forgiveness, gratitude and respect, and the cultivation of holiness, gives the family its strength. As a whole and through each of its members, the family experiences the joy of honest work, the unity that attends upon prayer and familial worship of God, and the bonding and support that results from the love of parents for their children, and of children for their parents

and for their brothers and sisters. The truly Catholic family can and should have an impact on the society in which it exists: its example of stability, proper exercise of authority, and harmonious relationships are transferable to society at large to bolster the foundations upon which freedom, security, and fraternity can flourish in the world community. Society can learn from the family how to care for the young, the sick and the handicapped, the old and the impoverished. Finally, the Catholic family has an evangelizing and missionary purpose. The children are taught by example and word the truths and virtues that will be carried forward into the generations to follow, to pass on the faith in Jesus Christ that they themselves received, and to help bring the world to that faith.

Raising Catholic Children

Before God, before themselves, and before society, a husband and wife as parents in a family have awesome and indispensable responsibilities. First, they must know that they live not *with* but *for* each other; for happiness here and hereafter. They are

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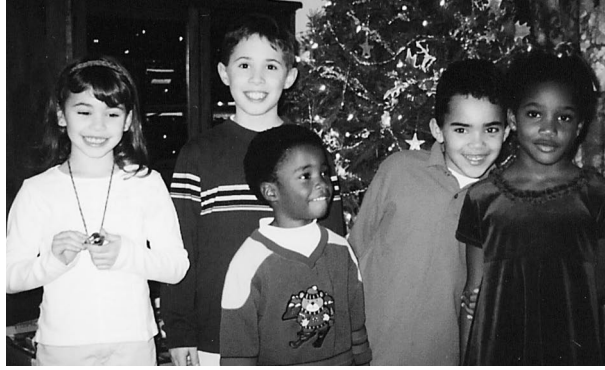


responsible for living in such a way as to assure that they will be forever together in Heaven. They have a reciprocal responsibility for each other's sanctity and salvation. To fulfill this obligation of mutual love and to provide the proper environment for wholesome Catholic living, parents establish a home characterized by respect, tenderness, fidelity, forgiveness, and self-sacrificing service. In this Catholic home, virtue can grow, for it is fostered by self-denial, solicitude, and just judgment as well as by a spirit of faith through which the things of God are given priority over the lesser things of daily concern.

Children encounter God's love first through the love their parents show them and each other. Parents also need to begin, very early, to tell and teach their children the story of God's overflowing love for all human beings, God's care for each of us, and our eternal destiny to live within the divine family of the Trinity.

The whole paradigm for Catholic family life should be one of forming disciples. Parents, as Catholic adults, must not only constantly strive to form their consciences more perfectly, but also help their children to form their consciences so that they might make correct choices when faced with decisions in their lives. Parents can follow the pattern laid out for them by Holy Mother Church towards her children — that is, all Catholics. In answering the question, "How does the Church parent us?," Catholic parents can develop principles and expectations for how they ought to bring their children up in holiness as well.

Unlike the attitudes common in our society that children's wills either need no formation at all or are to be broken in order for them to behave, a Catholic understanding of the human will is that our wills have already been weakened and wounded by sin, but that we still reflect the image and likeness of God. Parents are to nurture and form their children's will and conscience, gently and steadily showing them how to turn away from sin and choose the good in any situation while always respecting their great dignity as human beings. Just as the Lord does for each of us, parents also should reach down to their children's level of understanding and ability, meeting their needs so



“Children must be taught how to respect the presence of God.”

must seek God's grace, and that God has given them a free will so that they can freely choose the good, but that their free will can lead them to bad as well as to good choices. They need to learn that they can repent of wrongdoing and that God's forgiveness is, like Daddy's, always extended to a son or daughter who sincerely repents of sin and wants to become better. They need to learn that we are perfected within our communities — that no one can live outside God's family and be all they were meant to be, and that salvation comes from love of neighbor as well as love of God. They need to learn that God gave us his Church to help us to attain salvation, and that Heaven is not a place “in the clouds” where we all “get angel wings,” but is our true home where we can be enveloped in the wondrous family life of God. All this they need to understand, in an age-appropriate way, by the time they attain the age of reason and discretion (about six to eight years old), and repeatedly taught, with more depth, as they mature.

Although by Baptism God is present in the child, the child is not at first aware of God; it is the parents' responsibility to accomplish this. Baptism instills the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. These virtues make it possible for parents to nurture their children's understanding of their wonderful, unique, and irreplaceable place in God's plan of salvation; their belief in the marvelous truths about God and themselves; their own hope for salvation; and their ability to love others because they see Jesus in each of them. In doing so, parents should not merely be telling “Bible stories” to their children, but communicating their own joyous acceptance of God's Revelation and its meaning to them, so that their children make this the center of their own lives.

There are four important elements of religious ed-

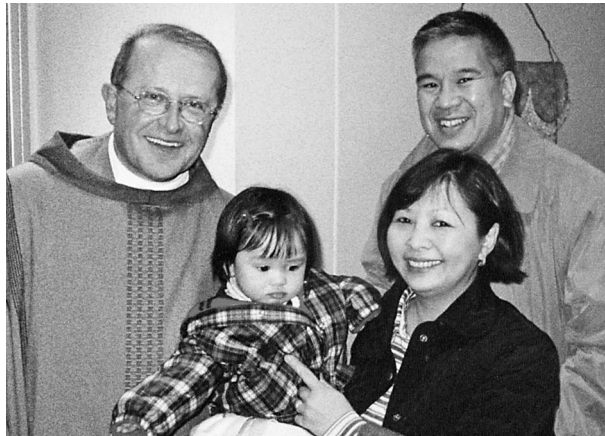
they learn trust and love. From this place, parents can slowly and patiently build in their children a desire and firm capacity for holiness that will stay with them through their whole life.

To this end, children need to learn, very early in life, that human nature is prone to sin, and that each of us needs the salvation that Jesus earned for us on the cross. They need to learn that they

education for children that ideally should begin during their preschool years. First, *children must learn to pray*. Through their own prayer life, parents teach the place of prayer in their children's lives. Children join parents in prayer when rising, before meals, and before going to sleep. Even small children can memorize the Sign of the Cross, the Our Father, and the Hail Mary. In addition, children can understand the concept of personal, spontaneous prayer much better than most adults think, for wonder at the unseen world is at its peak in young children. Children have no problem believing in Santa Claus and in writing letters to let him know what they desire, and parents can capitalize on the same impulse to turn their children's minds toward the most wondrous mysteries of all.

To promote the sense of holiness in the home, the Catholic family can set up, with the help and suggestions of the children, a sacred space or corner with a crucifix, a Bible, possibly a picture or statue of Jesus, Mary, or a saint, and, if desirable, votive lights. This sacred space reminds all in the household of God's presence in the family and in their individual lives. Other ways to sanctify the home include crucifixes in the bedrooms, religious art, and holy-water fonts, creating an environment that promotes prayer and the frequent remembrance of God.

A Catholic calendar allows the family to be aware of approaching feasts. Children's imagination and creativity can be drawn upon to prepare for feasts such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Advent wreaths and Advent calendars heighten the awareness of all family members to the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem. Children can be taught very early to pray more, practice voluntary penances, and give alms during Lent. Even Halloween — which in reality commemorates the Feast of All Saints ("All Hallows") — and Thanksgiving lend themselves to the creating of God-centered family traditions. Children can be encouraged to create and care for an outdoor shrine to the Blessed Virgin or a special saint. Family outings can include pilgrimages to churches and shrines.



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Second, *children must learn to worship in community* — that is, to participate in liturgy. While Mass may be difficult for infants and toddlers, parents should bring children to Mass from infancy. Going to Mass on Sundays, holy days, and other occasions should be made a matter of utmost importance and anticipation; cleanliness and proper dress for all should be emphasized. Children must be taught how to respect the presence of God in church and what is expected

of them, regardless of unacceptable behavior around them. Even the youngest can appreciate that something very special is happening during the consecration, and can be kept occupied with age-appropriate picture books of the Mass, Bible stories, and lives of the saints. Children should be taught specifically the meaning and importance of the liturgy; that our bodies as well as our hearts, minds, and souls need to worship God; and that worship is a community, not a solo, action.

They need to experience the world as it really is, not just the material world we can see, hear, and touch, but also the transcendent reality of God for which all human hearts are made. Liturgy points to and actually makes us present at the Heavenly worship and is a foretaste of that worship; it is an encounter with the living God.

Third, *children must learn Catholic attitudes* as a foundation for later instruction in virtue and doctrine. Among these attitudes are the following:

- 1) **A sense of the sacred** — that some events (such as Mass), objects (such as the Bible, crucifixes, vestments), and people (such as priests) are set apart for holy use.
- 2) **A sense of family** — that their family is a special collection of people, that their parish is an extended family, that every human is a brother or sister and that some need special help. Pope John Paul II reminded us that “God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family” (meeting with Latin American bishops, Pueblo, Mexico, 1979) — not *like* a family, but truly a family, so that we should see our human fami-

lies as a foretaste of the family for which we are made, God's divine family.

- 3) **A sense of the good** — that God created the world and all that is in it, and pronounced it good; that God created human beings to know, love, and do good; that in becoming human, Jesus elevated humanity with him; that there is a right way to appreciate and use all the wonderful things of the world; and that we must offer praise, thanksgiving, and gratitude for all that comes from God.
- 4) **A love of truth** — that God, who is Truth, created an objective truth that can be known and understood, and that truth should be searched out and held fast; that a fulfilling life comes from knowledge of and assent to the truth, for God gave it to us because, as a loving father and mother know and provide for their children's needs, he in his superabundant love knows that this is what we need.
- 5) **A sense of service**, selflessness, and blessing, which flows from the theological virtue of charity; that in following Jesus we selflessly devote our lives to serving others and become a blessing to them, and thereby become what we were created to be.
- 6) **A sense of hope** — that in the midst of suffering, immorality, and social breakdown, we can trust in God and his promises and face our future with confidence.

Fourth, parents need to *help their children to learn to avoid and resist sin*. By the age of discretion, children should already have begun their lifelong effort to cooperate with God's grace in mastering their will. This is most fully accomplished through the sacramental life — the regular reception of the Lord in the Eucharist and in his forgiveness in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Instruction in virtue must be accompanied by appropriate discipline, which itself is a manifestation of divine love, for *"the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives"* (Heb 12:6). Parental neglect in this area is especially grave, as our Lord says: *"whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"* (Mt 18:5-6).

As children approach adulthood, parents must work to ensure that family piety and devotions are transformed into genuine, deep faith, for otherwise as the children move into the larger society as teens and adults, their rootless faith will wither. Parents need especially to guard their children from the mod-

ern dismantling of faith. For today's society, "belief" is a purely secular concept and lacks any relevance to God's Revelation or objective truth. In addition, modern culture places a great premium on belief of any kind, without regard to the content of what's believed. God's Revelation in its awesome wholeness needs to be preserved and transmitted to children so that they can receive what is rightfully theirs as adopted children of God.

The important thing in the family is to place priority on almighty God. In our thoughts, our words, our deeds and aspirations, he is paramount: "seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt 6:33). Everything then falls into proper perspective, providing guidance and support in the solution to the inevitable difficulties that accompany life in our sin-laden world. Establishment of God as an integral part of family life helps parents choose the proper kind of schooling for their children and to give judicious advice when they confront the choice of a career and way of life. For "what does [God] desire? Godly offspring" (Mal 2:15) who will respond to God's call in their lives.

The Catholic family shows us, as is evident nowhere else, the priesthood of the laity in a domestic church. It shows us the mystery of Holy Mother Church forever united to her Head, Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Family. The beauty, splendor, and love of the Trinity is manifest in the earthly Catholic family, which can, with the Psalmist, rejoice: *"Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!"* (Ps 128).

(CCC 1652-1653, 1656-1657, 2201-2208, 2214-2217, 2219, 2221-2230, 2232-2233, 2685, 2691)

