

Responsible Christian Parenthood

Responsible Christian parenthood begins with a man and woman living the sacrament of marriage, learning and growing together, becoming what they are called to be as husband and wife. It is critical that couples be taught how to live this sacrament, how they are called to an intimate relationship with one another based on total self-giving love. This is how they will imitate Christ, how they will love one another as Christ loves them. This intimate relationship must involve more than just two. It must flow from the couple's relationship with (and love for) God, which then overflows outward onto one another and onto others, as they together become a sign/symbol of Christ's love for his bride, the Church. A husband and wife must become a true *communio* (covenant-union) of persons, a community of life and love. Pope John Paul II said, "They are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total self-giving" (FC 19). This crucial concept has to be stressed in parish marriage prep programs.

A married couple cooperates with God through mutual total self-giving in the marital act. Children are born into a family consisting of the traditions and heritage of both their parents. Pope Benedict XVI put it well: "Parents have the right and inalienable duty to transmit this heritage to their children: to help them find their own identity, to initiate them to the life of society, to foster the responsible exercise of their moral freedom and their ability to love on the basis of being loved and, above all, to enable them to encounter God" (Benedict 41). The Christian family, therefore, constitutes a special realization of *ecclesial communion*. This is why it is properly called the "domestic church" (FC 21). (I did four infant baptisms yesterday, and I made sure that this point came across clearly in my homily.)

Faith & Family

Deacon Greg Ollick

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Another important aspect of the family as a true *communio of persons* is that of service and sacrifice. This requires that each member of the family be open and generous in their relationships with one another as well as their relationships with those beyond the boundaries of the home. This will involve love, respect, obedience, understanding, forbearance and reconciliation. It will also involve altruism and empathy - a special caring for and serving of those in need together as a family, learning and growing from their interaction with one another.

Both parents must be completely present in the home, and work together. Many times in our culture this is not the case. In many situations it is the father who is absent. Pope John Paul II notes that, "The absence of a father causes psychological and moral imbalance and notable difficulties in family relationships" (FC 25). I believe that there is a dire need today for men to rise up within the home, on the job, with the community, and in the Church. There is a dire need for men to rise up and be leaders, examples, and pursuers of God, - ministers, prayers, teachers and trainers of our children, - loving, forgiving, compassionate and caring fathers and husbands. Today God is calling for fathers who are focused on fatherhood, focused on becoming the fathers that God has called them to be. A child's view of God as Heavenly Father will often be based upon their view of their Earthly Fathers. It has been said, a child is not likely to find a Father in God, unless he finds something of God in his father. Julie Rubio points out that, "Jesus did not ask different things of Christian mothers and fathers beyond pregnancy and nursing. The dual vocation of parenthood belongs to everyone" (Rubio 144). It takes the total intimate involvement of both mother and father for families to live their God-given vocation. Both must be fully parents to their children. In all too many cases, in my experience, it is only the mother who is truly present to the children.

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It is the mission of the Church to help Christian mothers and fathers in their task of strengthening the gift of divine grace in their children. John Paul II makes it clear: “Parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children. By praying with their children, by reading the word of God with them and by introducing them deeply through Christian initiation into the Body of Christ – both the Eucharistic and the ecclesial Body – they become fully parents” (FC 39). Julie Rubio sums up the duties of the family as the domestic church: “Families must serve the church as well as one another. As a church in miniature, the family evangelizes its members, witness to the world, uses its home as a sanctuary, and serves the broader community. Like the church, the family serves humanity” (Rubio 107). This is the ecclesial and the social mission of the family.

The Church must be there to provide the resources that both parents and their children need in order to learn and grow from the very beginning through continuous Christian religious education, opportunities for family reflection, prayer and service as well as the support of the other spiritual and temporal needs of the family. Kathleen Finley, quoted by Leif Kehrwald in his book on Families & Faith, points to the U.S. bishops and their admonition: “We need to enable families to recognize that they are a domestic church” (Kehrwald 89). She sees the pervasive problem in today’s American culture as the total separation of the sacred and the secular. “It seems that the world of sacraments and blessings and the world of making a living and raising a family have little to do with each other, and that Sunday activities have little to do with the rest of the week” (Kehrwald 87). To bring the sacred and the secular together is an essential part of the family ministry of the church. Finley notes that parishes can show families how to pray through times of transition - birthdays, anniversaries, graduation, and accomplishment - and through times of trial - illness, stress, hardship, disability and death

(Kehrwald 92). Parents should also be involved in the sacramental preparation of their children.

Parishes can facilitate this by making educational sessions available (mandatory) for them, sessions in which parents will learn how they can bring the Kingdom of God home and participant with their children in the preparation for, and the celebration of, the sacraments.

Parents must be aware of the sacramental theology involved with each sacrament, and help their children acquire the proper disposition (attitude of mind and heart) so that the fruits of the sacrament can be full realized.

There is often a need for healing and forgiveness in family life. As human beings, we are never perfect in our love, in our interactions with one another. Finley stresses that, “Although we might sorely disagree with each other, the love is always stronger than the hurt. That ability to know that we are held in love – for one another and in God – is the grace that can happen daily in families” (Kehrwald 96). Parishes can help by encouraging, uplifting, inspiring, instructing and challenging families to be aware of the process of forgiveness and reconciliation and to remember that families are holy, not because they are perfect but because God’s grace is at work in them (Kehrwald 96).

Families cannot fully imitate Christ and be what they are called to be as the domestic church without serving others outside of the family circle. Parishes can help families participate together in acts of service and kindness by simply making the opportunity available to them. Parishes can support families in acts of service by providing or publicizing various opportunities for service, such as networks for homeless families, Meals on Wheels, the Saint Vincent De Paul Society, a local woman’s shelter, etc. They can also help by acknowledging those who serve in this way, so that others can see how important a life of family serve really is (Kehrwald 97).

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Finally, families must be encouraged to spend more time together sharing their lives with one another and lifting one another up. The family meal is a great time for prayer, conversation and reflection. Finley, also quoted in *Families & Faith*, points out that, “the parish can help encourage families in this regard with ideas and suggestions for meal prayers and conversations during certain times of the year’ (Kehrwald 98). Finley sums it up nicely: “With help and encouragement from their parish faith communities, they can see Christ present among them when they share simple things like being aware of the dying and rising in their midst, praying for and blessing one another, celebrating holidays and transitional events, forgiving one another, serving others, talking about their faith and sharing a meal together” (Kehrwald 99).

Family and Career

Often times in our culture there is a conflict between the demands of family and career. My personal experience with this has changed my life, my family’s life and has helped me talk to others about what it means to be family. When my kids were young, we spent a lot of time together as a family, at meal time, playing afterwards, weekends and vacations. My wife and I, with the children, were a relationally healthy family. We interacted intimately with one another in a variety of ways – physically, emotionally and spiritually. The move to Atlanta was an attempt to be in the right place at the right time in order to take advantage of an opportunity to start a business of my own in the field in which I had been involved for several years. The business (diagnostic instrumentation for the field of audiology – the study of the ear, hearing and balance) grew rapidly as we added more products and more territory. It was a high tech, high stress, high travel situation. Soon the business and its growth became the top priority in my life and consumed almost all of my time. The family suffered as I dove further and further into my work. I was seldom home, and, when I was home, I was still preoccupied with work and not

really present for my family. It got to the point that I really had no idea what was going on in the lives of my own children. I had sacrificed the family on the altar of the bottom line.

By the time that I came to my senses and realized how I had been harming my family, the damage was done. We were a family in name only, each going it alone and in different directions. I spent the next several years trying to make up for what I had done and repair the hurts. We are an intimate relationally healthy family once more, but we will never be the same; we can never get back fully what we lost during all of that time. I made a promise that I would spend the rest of my life helping others, building stronger families and fostering more intimate relationships, trying to keep other parents from making the mistakes that I made. My family is together again as *an intimate community of life and love* only through the grace of God, and I share this experience in order to help others learn something about family, vocation and discipleship from my mistakes.

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