

Evangelizing the Family – Forming Disciples for Life

The majority of Catholic families will not remain Catholic for life. In most cases, as children grow up and venture out on their own, they quickly lose their Catholic identity and spirituality. It was once believed that this growing group of young adults would eventually come back to the Church, when they get married or have a child, but current statistics have shown that this is not the case. The number of adults leaving the Church has been increasing dramatically in every generation. This is a trend that must be taken very seriously and the Church must find new and innovative ways to reverse it if it is to continue its apostolic mission in the West and, in fact, in all of the Northern Hemisphere. I believe that an intense focus on family evangelization and family catechesis at the parish, diocese, national and international levels is the primary answer. This new initiative must be taken up by the Church, religious and lay organizations and individuals who realize the tremendous need and are passionately dedicated to evangelizing the whole family and *forming disciples for life*.

Example Just this past weekend, I had a big wedding. The bride's family was Catholic and the groom's family was either Protestant or simply unaffiliated with any Christian religion. I have known both the bride and groom for years, but I did not realize all of the religious complications on the groom's side. The problem was that many of his relatives, including his mother and her younger sister, were brought up Catholic in the 1950s and 60s and were now Protestant anti-Catholics. His aunt (along with some other relatives) was "practicing" her Protestant faith, his mother was not. The groom had been evangelized by his fiancé and me. We introduced him to the possibility of a personal relationship with God. We had baptized him the weekend before, and he is now enrolled in our RCIA program. It was, of course, a Catholic wedding at a Catholic

church, with a lot of Catholic guests, and the reception, in the parish hall, was even catered by a Catholic organization, the Knights of Columbus. As one might imagine, some of the groom's relatives were not very happy about this situation.

In talking to them, I found out that they each had many grave misunderstandings about the teachings and the practices of the Church. They learned their Catholic faith as children and had never had the opportunity, motivation, incentive or resources that they would have needed to continue their Catholic catechetical development as adults. As a result, they had a very immature faith that they could not even begin to explain or defend when it was challenged by the many Southern Evangelicals, some of whom are very aggressive at "evangelizing" nominally catechized Catholic adults. I talked to them about the Church and the profound and consistent truth of its teachings and practices. I assured them that Catholics are indeed Christians who know and love Jesus. After the wedding ceremony (the Rite of Matrimony Outside of Mass), every one of the anti-Catholic protesters told me that they had just witnessed the most remarkable Catholic service that they can ever remember. What made the wedding so remarkable was that I, for the first time, followed the new guidelines for the marriage liturgy as described in Julie Rubio's book, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family*:

"Situate the celebration of marriage within the context of a participating community of family and friends gathered as one family in the church...We must see ourselves as a community of disciples centered on the risen Christ....This is a time for the church community to gather together as it always does to celebrate its unity in Christ, as well as a time for a particular community of Christian families and friends (Catholic and Protestant) to gather and witness the union of a particular couple" (Rubio 38).

It was not simply the couple that was involved here, but the entire community that had come together (however reluctantly) for this occasion.

Knowing the situation, I made sure that my homily (as an evangelistic tool/resource which should be used much more for this purpose) was dramatic (so that it would get their attention and they would never forget it) and also catechetical (so that they would learn something that they so desperately needed to know). The homily was a teaching tool about authentic Christ-like self-giving love, marriage, family and community – a continuation and the conclusion of the couple’s marriage prep. This is significant because it was a real-world snapshot of the most fundamental and crucial teachings of the Church in the modern world. With our common prayer, our solidarity with the couple and with one another, with our vision of the Christian family and community, our outreach to a world of suffering and need, our friendly and welcoming atmosphere, our inviting fellowship, and the reflection of our intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, we were able to change some hearts and minds through the experience of living out the Christian mission as community, church and family. This is just one example of the kind of Catholic evangelization of the family that must be practiced by every Catholic parish, organization, clergy member and individual at every level and at every opportunity, if we are to ever going to be able to change minds and hearts and begin to form disciples for life.

Has the Church been forming disciples for life? It has been shown that molding practicing Catholic families, and teaching them to live as an active committed domestic church, is one of the best means of forming disciples for life. The minimum statistical measurement for a “practicing” Catholic is regular Mass attendance. According to the Center for Applied

Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA), Mass attendance in the United States has fallen by more than half since 1965. In 1965, research determined that 55 percent of American Catholics attended Mass regularly. Now that number is a dismal 24 percent (CARA 2014). The Pew Form on Religion and Public Life published similar findings in 2008: “Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31 percent) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24 percent) describe themselves as Catholic. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for the offsetting impact of immigration” (Pew, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 6). The situation in Europe is much the same. CARA publishes some data about Mass attendance in other countries. I was surprised to find that even in a primarily Catholic country like Spain regular Mass attendance is only 17.4 percent. On two recent visits to Italy with the Archdiocese of Atlanta, I asked our expert tour guides what percentage of the Catholic population attends Mass regularly. They said that that statistic is very well known, and sadly it is less than 25 percent.

The number of young Catholics practicing their faith has also dropped. In a 2008 study, *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practices Among U.S. Catholics*, CARA published some disturbing figures about Mass attendance. They found that 45 percent of Boomers and 20 percent of Baby Boomers are attending Mass regularly, while only 13 percent of those from Gen X and 10 percent of Millennials regularly attended Mass on Sundays. (Gray et al 41). In her new book, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, Sherry Weddell quotes these alarming statistics and sums up the prospects for the future of the Church:

“If this trend does not change, in ten years it will cease to matter that we have a priest shortage. The generation of Builders will be largely gone, the Boomers will be retiring, and our institutions – parishes and schools – will be emptying at an incredible rate. Sacramental practice will plummet at a rate that will make the post-Vatican era look good, and the Church’s financial support will vanish like Bernie Madoff’s investment portfolio” (Weddell 39).

Though this is a dramatic overstatement for the purpose of effect, it should get our attention and help us focus on the issue. If all of these people are leaving the Church, what are they doing, what do they believe, where are they going and why? A study of some of these questions, and the answers, will give us a better understanding of the problem and the solution.

It is often said that the second largest Christian denomination/group in the U.S. is that of Catholics who have left the Church. These are people who no longer self-identify as Catholic. CARA estimates this population in the U.S. to be about 32,000,000. According to CARA’s Frequently Requested Catholic Statistics website page, the estimated current total number of those in the U.S. who self-identify as Catholic is about 76,700,000. The Official Catholic Directory of parish-connected Catholics puts the estimated total U.S. number of Catholics at 66,600,000. The statistics on the sacrament of marriage are just as bad. In 1965 there were 352,458 Catholic marriages performed in the United States; in 2013 there were only 168,400, about half (CARA, 2014). As Church, we have not formed disciples for life in the past, and the statistics on the younger generations indicate that we certainly are not forming disciples for life now. Something has to change dramatically, if, as church, we are to reverse this trend. I believe that our common efforts must be centered on helping our people and families from childhood

become true disciples of Christ, developing and growing in an intimate relationship with him and continuing for life within marriage and family through prayer, study, community, service and sacrament. Disciples (followers) can become “apostles” only when they *know* their faith and *live* their faith; only then can they be “sent” (as apostles are) to *share* their faith with others.

Sherry Weddell studied the fate of the former Catholics who have left the Church. She writes, “The most important reason that former Catholics who end up as Protestants give for leaving the Church is, ‘My spiritual needs were not being met.’ Catholics who became *evangelical* Protestants are even more likely to claim this statement as their primary reason for leaving (78 percent as opposed to 71 percent)” (Weddell 29). On top of that, she said 74 percent of those who became evangelical said that they “felt called by God.” Many Catholic leaders make the mistake of thinking that former Catholics left the Church because they simply wanted to be entertained. Weddell has worked within the evangelical community for decades and refutes this response: “Certainly no Catholic that I have met in the evangelical world has ever talked about a desire for ‘entertainment’ as a motivation for ceasing to attend Mass...The real answer is that, ‘I never met Jesus in a living way as a Catholic’” (Weddell 31). One must meet Jesus in a *living way* within the family, the community and the church. We, as church, have not fulfilled our primary commission: “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all that I have taught you” (Matthew 28:19). Faith, for many Catholics, has not become a *relationship*. According to a recent Gallop poll, 30 percent of U.S. Catholics answered “no” when asked whether religion is important in their daily lives (Gallop 2012). These “Catholics” have not met Jesus in a living way. They have not developed an intimate personal relationship with him. This relationship must be the ultimate goal of the Church – the goal of faith. The

ultimate goal of faith is a *relationship* of trust, a fundamental confidence in the power and the goodness of God. Relationship is first learned (and learned best) within the family, and family ministry must become our new focus.

Others who leave the Catholic Church simply become unaffiliated. They don't "practice any particular religion. Weddell analyzed this group: "71 percent 'just gradually drifted away,' and 65 percent claim that they stopped believing in the teachings of the Church... They said that they stopped believing certain Church teachings, including those on abortion, homosexuality, birth control, divorce and remarriage" (Weddell 34). Within the Church today there is much discussion at every level concerning these issues. It takes a strong adult faith to first properly and fully understand the Church's teachings on these and many other issues in today's world, and then to respond appropriately. Weddell concludes that, "It is an adult's spiritual journey – building upon his or her experience as a child and teenager – that is most likely to translate into lifelong faith and consistent religious practice" (Weddell 35). This "spiritual journey" begins in the home on the foundation of the family and continues to grow throughout life.

It's all about *relationship*, but the problem is that nearly a third of all self-identified Catholics believe in an *impersonal* God. Weddell says that, "Only 60 percent of Catholics believe in a personal God. Twenty-nine percent believe that God is an 'impersonal force'" (Weddell 43). Sherry Weddell correlates one's certainty about a personal relationship with God and one's practice of religion:

"How much of our faith can make sense to millions of Catholics when the bedrock foundation – belief in a personal God who loves us – is not in place? For younger Catholics, cultural Catholicism is not nearly enough. For them, the level of attendance at

worship services is directly correlated with the certainty that it is possible to have a personal relationship with God” (Weddell 44).

After years of studying this problem with the Catherine of Siena Institute, Weddell knows that, “One of the most fundamental challenges facing our Church is that the majority of adult Catholics are not even certain that a personal relationship with God is possible” (Weddell 46).

Our conclusion has to be that comprehensive and continuous *family faith formation* must be the Church’s new primary focus at the parish level and at every other level. The family is one’s first experience with relationship. The personal relationship that God wants with us, experienced in self-giving love, must become the basis for all of our relationships and must be modeled from the beginning in the family, the community and the church. It is up to us, as parish leaders, to make this happen. If we don’t take the mandate of family faith formation to heart now and make it happen, we will never be able to form disciples for life.

All Christian families are called to mutual self-giving relationships, relationships that model the love of God for us. Rubio understands human nature and relationship. She says, “Human beings are not meant to live alone. Rather, they are called to live in relationship – in community with one another” (Rubio 186). Jesus knew this from the beginning. (After all, he was there, “in the beginning.”) He began to gather a community from the beginning of his public ministry. By his teaching and example he molded them into the community that the church and the family is called to be. He told them to love one another as he had loved them - with an intimate unconditional self-giving love. This community was to go beyond its own members and interest. “They were bound to look beyond their own personal good in order to seek the good of the larger community of persons to which they belong” (Rubio 186). They

must learn to value the good of others. They must learn the value of solidarity and understand that they have a specific obligation to serve and empower the poor (Rubio 186). This is the “domestic church” living in love and relationship with God, with one another and with others as intended from the beginning. This is what forms disciples for life. In her other book on the family, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians*, Julie Rubio describes the family as the domestic church: “As a ‘church in miniature,’ the family evangelizes its members, witnesses to the world, uses its home as a sanctuary (for rituals, prayer and sacramentals), and serves the broader community – for like the church, the family is a servant of humanity” (Rubio 56).

In my experience with family ministry within the parish, family members from families who truly live this model of the domestic church from their childhood (and I know many), remain active practicing Catholics in adulthood. They become disciples for life. Rubio agrees: “Research suggests that children from families that engage in intentional faith-based practices (those based on a loving self-giving relationship with God and neighbor) with their families are more likely to have a strong faith later in life” (Rubio 227). The *personal relationship* with God, that so many Catholics lack, is exactly what the Christian family is all about. If this relationship is not known, lived and shared in the family as the basic unit of the church and of the society, it is not likely to be realized later in life. At this point, a person is lost and begins to seek God elsewhere, or worse. Many turn to self-indulgence as a substitute for God and can never be ultimately fulfilled. It is the mission of the Church, as it was the mission of Jesus (and of Vatican II), to make the vision of the domestic church - a reality in our parish families. This is the only way to form disciples for life.

Marriage Family and Cohabitation Today marriage and the family are in crisis in our culture. Many young people do not believe that marriage is necessary and/or desirable. Super high percentages of young people are cohabitating as an alternative. We actually celebrate each time a cohabitating couple comes to us seeking the sacrament of marriage. This number is less and less every year. In 1999, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) published an insightful document on the topic. They said,

“Cohabitation is a pervasive and growing phenomenon with a negative impact on the role of marriage as the foundation of family. The incidence of cohabitation is much greater than is indicated by the number of cohabiting couples presenting themselves for marriage. Slightly more than half of couples in first-time cohabitations ever marry; the overall percentage of those who marry is much lower when it includes those who cohabit more than once. Cohabitation, as a permanent or temporary alternative to marriage, is a major factor in the declining centrality of marriage in family” (USCCB, 1999).

The bishops continue to describe the impact of this extremely pervasive cultural phenomenon: “It is estimated that 60 to 80 percent of the couples coming to be married are cohabiting. (*US Bureau of the Census, 1995; Bumpass, Cherlin & Sweet, 1991*) Overall, fewer persons are choosing to be married today; the decision to cohabit, as a permanent or temporary alternative to marriage, is a primary reason (*Bumpass, NSFH Paper #66, 1995*)” (USCCB, 1999). The cohabitating couples who present themselves for marriage are certainly not “practicing Catholics.” Their motives for seeking a Catholic wedding are usually simply cultural. One engaged young lady said, “My grandmother would just die right now, if I didn’t get married in the Church.” (Her grandmother, of course, did not know

that she was cohabitating.) This is certainly not the proper disposition for receiving the sacrament of matrimony. The U.S. bishops confirmed the religious practice of cohabitating couples:

“Persons with low levels of religious participation and who rate religion of low importance are more likely to cohabit and less likely to marry their partner than those who consider religion important and practice it. There is no difference in frequency of cohabitation by religious denomination; there is a significant difference in cohabitation frequency by level of religious participation. (*Krishnan, 1998; Lye & Waldron, 1997; Thornton, Axinn & Hill, 1992; Liejbroer, 1991; Sweet, 1989*)”
(USCCB, 1999).

The Church has failed to reach the younger generations, and, as a result, they have fallen prey quite easily to the prevailing modern cultural philosophies of individualism, hedonism, and materialism. The Catholic vision of marriage and family is unknown and/or unappreciated.

Though marriage prep offers the Church the opportunity to evangelize and catechize these couples, a solid Catholic vision of marriage and family should have been in place and have been taken to heart even from childhood. Pope John Paul II was very insightful when he envisioned marriage preparation beginning in childhood and continuing throughout life. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul outlined the fact that marriage prep actually begins in early childhood with the good developmental influence of a Christian family on the formation of character and solid catechesis about the true vocation and mission of marriage and family. John Paul II calls this “remote preparation” (FC 66). One’s marriage prep continues with catechetical

instruction for reception of the sacraments with the proper disposition. Children are also prepared for marriage as they experience the family apostolate with active membership of the family in the work of the Church for the spiritual and temporal good of others. John Paul II calls this “proximate preparation” (FC 66). The third level of marriage prep that John Paul refers to is the “immediate preparation.” He notes that this is “similar to the catechumenate.” During this critical period the couple should receive intellectual and spiritual formation resulting in “a deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ and the Church, of the meaning of grace and of the responsibilities of Christian marriage, as well as preparation for taking an active and conscious part in the rite of the marriage liturgy” (FC 66). All of this should lead to the couple acquiring the “proper disposition” for the sacrament of matrimony - that of an enduring authentic self-giving love for one another, openness to the will of God, a vision of a future Christian family and “a desire to enter more actively into the ecclesial community” (FC 66). The marriage crisis is a very grave situation. It reinforces the desperate need for family evangelization and family faith formation with a very strong adult catechetical component. We need all of these levels of marriage and family preparation beginning in early childhood, as Pope John Paul II envisioned and articulated so well. This is really the only rock-solid way of forming disciples for life.

The marriage preparation of the cohabitating couple is, at least, an opportunity to begin to help them learn about and embrace the Catholic vision of marriage and family and begin on the road to conversion and transformation aided by the graces of the sacrament. Our marriage prep programs must include the presentation of John Paul’s “Law of the Gift.” This is the vision of self-giving (agape) love that John Paul described so clearly in his work, *Love and Responsibility*. I have seen couples transformed by embracing this vision of love applied to their new life

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together and their future vision of family. It has also brought them back to the practice of their faith while they seek to develop a more intimate relationship with God, one another, and others. Again, “*It’s all about relationship.*” (I have included my current marriage prep presentation on this topic in a separate PowerPoint document – 2 hours)

Divorce and Re-Marriage Many Catholics have left the Church due to divorce and remarriage. In our modern culture, divorce is extremely commonplace. It is accepted as normal, when it was once considered a scandal. Studies continue to conclude that about half of all first marriages end in divorce (CDC 2011). The U.S. culture has become so secular, that it has completely missed the message about what marriage and family is all about. Fortunately, these numbers appear to be slightly better in Catholic populations. According to a 2007 survey by CARA concerning Catholics in the U.S., “12 percent of adult Catholics are currently divorced. Additionally 11 percent of adult Catholics who are not currently divorced say they have been divorced at some point in their lives. Thus, collectively at least 23 percent of adult Catholics have experienced divorce” (Gray, et al 23). 23 percent is very significant. George Barna, of the Barna Group, in 2008 reported the percentage of U.S. Catholics who have been divorced at 28 (Barna Group 2008). I know dozens of divorced and remarried Catholics who have left the Church or simply do not participate any longer. Some of them, like the groom’s mother and aunt in the wedding story at the beginning of this paper, have developed an anti-Catholic personal theology beginning with this issue. Some have become so bitter that they have ended all Christian affiliation. (This issue is the reason that there was absolutely no level of catechesis in the groom’s family. He, like his sibling, was never catechized, never baptized, never even introduced to the love of God.)

The CARA survey report also affirms that Mass attendance (participation within the Catholic faith community) is very poor among divorced Catholics. The 2007 survey concluded that, “Thirty-three percent of those who rarely or never attend Mass are or have been divorced” (Gray, et al 24). To put it another way, “Married respondents are more likely than divorced or separated respondents to say they attend Mass once a week or more - 26 percent compared to 12 percent of divorced or separated” (Gray et al 31). It is clear that family ministry must begin with marriage preparation that highlights the heart of the sacrament – a *relationship* of mutual self-giving, sacrificial love, a true communion (covenant-union) of persons living the “sacramental life” – being a visible sign of God’s grace. (See a description of living the “sacramental life” in the Unit 4 assignments.) The fact is that the majority of Catholics are not very familiar with what the Church teaches about the sacrament of marriage. The survey indicated that, “37 percent say they are only ‘somewhat familiar’ and almost one-quarter (23 percent) say they are just ‘a little familiar’” (Gray, et al 34). The data indicates clearly (as cited earlier) that the more Catholics know and live their faith, the less likely they are to divorce and the more likely they are to continue to participate fully in the life of the faith community of the Church, and this life leads to stronger more committed marriages. The survey concluded that, “As with previous research, there is a *strong relationship* between frequency of Mass attendance (participation in and with the Catholic faith community) and various aspects of marital status. Among those who have ever been married, those who rarely or never attend Mass are most likely to have been divorced” (Gray, et al 2). Marriage, family and the church, together as a loving faith community, is vital for right relationships. Marriage ministry is, therefore, family ministry, and these two can never be separated.

Marriage and Family Life The percentage of two-parent households is declining in the U.S., and has been since the 1970s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008 nearly 30 percent of households were headed by single-parents. Today one-third of American children (15 million) are being raised without a father. In the African-American population, 54 percent of children are being raised by single mothers. Fatherlessness has a major negative effect on children in areas such as drug use, crime, education, poverty, etc. A steady drop in marriage and an increase in the divorce rate are responsible. Evangelization and catechesis that focuses on *relationship*, authentic love, fidelity, commitment (covenant), family and community must be the primary focus of every local parish/diocese, if the Church is to contribute to reversing these dismal statistics. The Church, from the bottom up, must make every possible effort and use every possible resource to reach out to young people and families with the message of true love and the value of an intimate loving relationship with God and one another. This is the only way to form disciples for life.

Conclusion When Catholics do not *know* their faith, they cannot be expected to *live* it or *share* it. The Church cannot be effective in bringing home the gospel message when a significant number of adult Catholics remain so poorly catechized that they cannot claim, and witness to, a personal *relationship* with Jesus Christ. Only a church full of real committed *disciples for life* can affect the greater community and change the culture. I believe that there is a crisis of adult catechesis in the Northern hemisphere. A clear majority of adult Catholics have an immature faith foundation. This has led to the increasing numbers of “fallen away Catholics” (Catholics not living their faith as adult Christians) and even the increasing numbers of cohabitating couples and divorces among Catholics. The culture, including many Catholics, suffers from a complete

ignorance about what relationship, marriage and family are all about. I hope to have demonstrated in the paper how poor adult catechesis is one of the most significant issues that the Church must face in the years to come, and that evangelizing the family must begin with adult faith formation. The breakdown of marriage and the family is devastating our American culture. The problems and the solutions are complex. An incomplete and immature understanding of the Christian message and the sacramental nature of marriage and family underlies the issue. As seen, this problem contributes greatly to a marked decrease in the number of marriages, a staggering number of cohabitating couples, the increased number of divorces and single-parent households, the breakdown of the family and the diminishing number of practicing Catholics. Individualism, consumerism, materialism, hedonism and utilitarianism rule the day. This is the exact opposite of the Christian message. We, the Church, must make this message clear. The entire culture must change and the answer must come from below – from the individual, the family, the parish, local organizations and the broader community. The parish is on the front line in this battle. The parish is right in the middle of it all, and is the best resource that the Church has in place. It is the parish that is called to begin to change these dreadful trends. Evangelizing the family must become the New Evangelization, and it must begin with, and continue to include, adult faith formation. Adult catechesis is the key, and it begins with marriage prep, because if we fail to get the message out to the engaged couple, we will not get the message to the married couple. If we fail to reach married couples, we will fail to reach the parents. If we fail to reach the parents, we will fail the family. If the family misses the message, the basic unit, the very foundation of the Church (and the society), is lost, and we will have failed again to form disciples for life. (Please see my new website at: www.epiphanyinitiative.com.)

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