

The Family and the Sacramental Life

By: Deacon Greg Ollick

Someone once said that “a sacrament is the sacred bubbling up through the ordinary.” That can certainly be true of the Christian family. Saint Augustine called a sacrament “a visible sign of God’s invisible grace.” In this broad view of sacrament, Jesus is considered the “first sacrament,” the first really visible sign of God’s invisible grace. We often say that, if Christ is the first sacrament, the Church is the “second sacrament,” called to be Christ to the world in every generation. The Christian family is also called to be a sacrament. They are called, like the Church, to be Christ to one another as well as to the broader community. By becoming what they are called to be, the family lives the sacramental life, and the sacred can bubble up through the ordinary things of everyday life. What on earth can be more of a sign of God’s grace than the authentic total self-giving love of a fully committed married couple whose love for one another brings life and spills out upon their children and with them onto those beyond the family? This, I believe, is the new vision of the Christian family for the 21st century, and the church must be an integral part of this life.

The modern culture, in which we live today with its wide range technology, offers much distraction and makes it especially difficult for the family to live the “sacramental life.” In my ministry, I hear almost every day from parents about just how difficult it is. One mother recently complained to me about how hard it was to raise her seven school-age children, help them with their homework and get them to all of the school and extra-curricular functions and events while both parents work in demanding full time professional jobs. She asked me how in the world she is supposed to fit in practicing their religion other than getting them all to Mass on Sunday and PSR, Edge and LifeTeen on Wednesday evenings. She said that their home was certainly

nothing like a “domestic church.” Instead, she said that it was “constant crisis and chaos.” In the midst of all of this, believe it or not, there are still many ways for a family to live the sacramental life, because God uses the very ordinary things of life and ordinary people to do the extraordinary, to transform people, families and the culture. Author Julie Rubio reminds us that it’s all about who we are: “Christians must not separate faith and life. What people do with their days is a fundamental part of who they are” (Rubio 52). We must realize that even work can be prayer, if we acknowledge God as the one in charge and do everything for his honor and glory. “A person’s work is his or her vocation, one way that he or she becomes who he or she is called to be” (Rubio 52). It is one’s attitude about work that changes everything. “All Christians are called to find work that constitutes prayer for them and engage in it as prayer....Any job that allows one to support a family constitutes good work” (Rubio 53). I once saw this definition of faith and I never forgot it: “Faith is an attitude of absolute trust, a fundamental confidence in the power and the glory of God.” With this in mind, parents should never look at their jobs in the same way again; instead it is a vocation, it is good and it is prayer, if we only approach it like we would approach a sacrament – with the proper disposition and with an absolute trust in the power and goodness of God in every situation, even at work.

Even if work is prayer, what about that “crisis and chaos” we find when we get home? How do we change the culture that continues to beguile the family? First of all, every Christian is called to constant conversion. This has to be carried to the workplace and home again. Rubio agrees that our constant path of conversion is what will change the culture of the family, the local community and eventually the world. “Christians are to strive for constant conversion; it is never finished. One’s whole life (at home and at work) is to be about the universal call to holiness in a particular way, a way that includes changing the culture (of the family and the

world)” (Rubio 56). That is the sacramental life, where the sacred bubbles up through the ordinary, and it is a powerful force for good. Rubio sums it up like this: “Social transformation proceeds from below (from you and me) and necessarily involves a change of heart, ongoing conversion, and counter-cultural practices that can only begin at home” (Rubio 58).

In even the busiest of worlds, all families can agree to eat at least one meal per week together in solidarity with one another as a community of life and love. My family, though the kids are grown (38 and 40) and we live in separate towns in metro Atlanta, comes together for a meal at least once a week. The conversion of certain members of the family has caught on and inspired other family members. Rubio agrees that these gatherings are formative: “When families come together over meals, those meals are formative. In coming together to eat, a family recognizes the bonds they share. The family meal shapes its member’s character and sends them off to be certain kinds of people” (Rubio 129). Rubio also points to the many studies that have explained the benefits of the family meal, and she urges families to expand this practice: “The more often a family eats together, the less likely children are to drink, smoke, take drugs, be overweight, have eating disorders, get depressed, or consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay sex, avoid drugs, eat healthy food, have a good vocabulary and use good manners” (Rubio 129). Adding a simple prayer of thanksgiving, expanded by each family member identifying something that they are thankful for, makes this meal sacramental because everyone can see and hear a visible sign of God’s invisible grace. This is how Julie Rubio can make the statement that “eating is a seemingly ordinary family practice that profoundly affects the social order” (Rubio 131). Work is now prayer, the family meal (if only once a week) is sacramental, conversion is shared, a prayer of thanksgiving is rendered to God and the social order is changed. This meal can certainly have a Eucharistic

character. Eucharist means thanksgiving and the Eucharist is a meal of covenant-union. The members present at this family meal share communion with God and with one another. That itself is a form of prayer. At the end of a Eucharistic celebration there is a commissioning, a sending forth to be what the community is called to be, a sacrament – a visible sign of God’s invisible grace. This can truly be a beginning (and a profound one) for any family, even the ones with all that “crisis and chaos.”

Parents in busy households can live the sacramental life by tithing and letting their children know why they are doing it. The family members may have to go without certain things so that others might have the necessities of life. This is a good example that children are unlikely to forget. One young father wrote a tribute to his parents that he shared with a radio talk- show host. In it he said that his parents taught him by example the importance of sacrifice and giving by placing an offering that they could barely afford in the second collection in order to help those who were even less fortunate than they were. The regular example of self-giving can go a long way. This is indeed living the sacramental life as we demonstrate being what we are called to be – a visible sign of God’s invisible grace.

Parents must constantly fight the effects of consumerism in our culture. In her book on *The Theology of Marriage and Family*, Julie Rubio says that “consumerism functions as a kind of armor isolating people from their friends and family and allows them to refuse to hear the cries of the poor” (Rubio 196). Parents must have this in mind all of the time and fight against it via their good example. “We don’t just work for money and we value people over things. We pray even as we work, and we are grateful to God for what we have especially one another. We give because we care. We live the sacramental life at home.”

That same young father who expressed his gratitude for his parents mentioned something else about how his family lived the sacramental life. He said, “You taught me by example that *acts of kindness* are natural outpourings of a loving heart when you mowed the elderly neighbor’s lawn instead of just our own.” This is leading by example. Even with all the “crisis and chaos” of the family that I mentioned earlier, they found the time to work together just once a month helping those who could not do simple things for themselves. They visit elderly persons in retirement/nursing facilities around town, talking to them and doing light tasks around the apartment/house. The husband is now the leader of our parish extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to the sick. Pope John Paul II quoting the 1980 Synod of Bishops said, “The task of the family is to form persons in love and also practice love in all relationships...moved by a sense of justice and concern for others, as well as by a consciousness of its responsibility toward the whole of society” (FC 64). This is the sacramental life. This is what we are all called to be as family – a visible sign of God’s invisible grace. This is an example of one family beginning to live the sacramental life, even in a seemingly impossible situation and transforming the culture one day at a time.

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