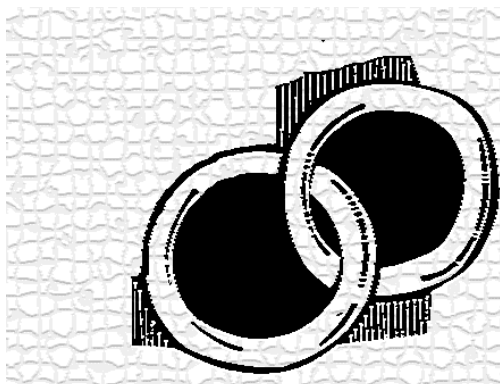


THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the ministry of catechesis, religious educators are not alone. Even before a child steps out of their home and into a religious education program, they have been introduced to the faith by parents and family.



In the sacrament of Matrimony parents receive “the grace and ministry of the Christian education of their children, to whom they transmit and bear witness to human and religious values.’ This educational activity which is both human and religious is ‘a true ministry,’ through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated so that family life is transformed into a journey of faith and the school of Christian life. As the children grow, exchange of faith becomes mutual and ‘in a catechetical dialogue of this sort, each individual both receives and gives.’ It is for this reason that the Christian community must give very special attention to parents. By means of personal contact, meetings,

courses and also adult catechesis directed toward parents, the Christian community must help them assume their responsibility - which is particularly delicate today - of educating their children in the faith.”

GDC #227

The parent first makes the formal decision to pass on faith when the child is brought to be baptized. The rite of baptism aptly acknowledges that children first experience God in the arms of their parents. The home is where children first experience the sacred presence of God as personal and intimate or come to believe in an impersonal and indifferent God because of the behavior modeled by parents. By watching and imitating parents, children learn how to love and embrace, to listen and respond, to belong, to forgive, to pray, to reach out and to serve, or conversely, will not learn these virtues and behaviors if they are not modeled by the parents. These common parental activities form the core of the ministry that make parents the primary educators in faith.



THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

GENERAL INTRODUCTION, CONT'D



In addition to its emphasis in the baptismal ritual, the importance of parents is also noted in the *General Directory for Catechesis* when it states, “the witness of Christian life given by parents in the family comes to children with tenderness and parental respect. Children thus perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first Christian experience frequently leaves decisive traces which last throughout life. This childhood religious awakening which takes place in the family is irreplaceable. It is consolidated when, on the occasion of certain family events and festivities, ‘care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of these events.’ It is deepened all the more when parents comment

on the more methodical catechesis which their children later receive in the Christian community and help them to appropriate it. Indeed, ‘family catechesis precedes...accompanies and enriches all forms of catechesis.’”

GDC #226

It is only because of the faith of the family that a child can be baptized at all. The child’s faith is an offshoot of the faith of the parents, and it is the parent’s faith which nourishes the child during growth to maturity. If the family does not fulfill this charge, either because faith is lacking or because of apathy and laxity, then the faith of the child will normally fail to mature into a truly personal faith. It will remain instead in an infantile state only to be later rejected or gradually disappear. Sociological studies of the family show, in fact, how true this is. The religious attitude and practice of young people is influenced by the family far beyond their early school years, and far more than by companions or even one’s work milieu.

In our society today, returning to the basics seems to be a panacea for many of the ills of the world. It is most loudly proclaimed in education and in religious education, often, paradoxically, by those least able to define the basics they espouse. In many cases, the more educated the parent, the less likely s/he is to support a return to the fundamental school concept. The more faith-rounded the Catholic parent, the less likely s/he is to accept memorization of content as evidence of successful religious education. Still, a call for a return to basic principles echoes in our church.

THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

GENERAL INTRODUCTION, CONT'D

The real “basic principle” is that parents are not only the primary, but also the best teachers of children in terms of faith. Parishes must understand it is a part of their responsibility to support parents in this ministry. Aiding them in their growth, affirming and supporting them in their role as parents and transmitters of faith is the most important task in the design and implementation of family programs. If parents are secure in their faith, if the religious education programs help them live that faith life, ritualize it and be aware of the numerous teachable moments present every day, the faith will indeed be passed on to the next generation.

As society has changed, so has the role and structure of families. Consider this comparison between the family of “yesterday” and “today.”

YESTERDAY’S “GOOD” CATHOLIC FAMILY

It had two parents.

They were both Catholic.

There were many children.

Mom was at home.

This was a parish-centered family, deriving its education, welfare, and social life as well as its spiritual life from the parish.

There was weekly family attendance at confession and Mass.

There was faithful attendance at the parish school or CCD.

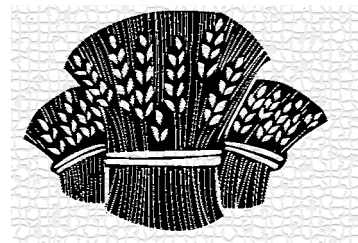
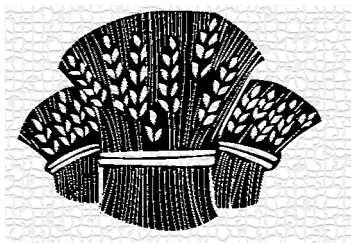
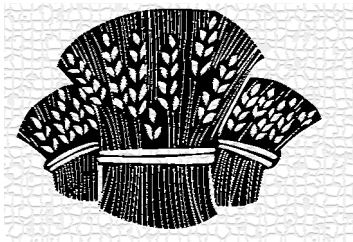
There was much parent-child contact.

Parents had strict control over influences on their children.

There was a slow pace of life.

The family was supportive of the pastor and parish staff regardless of their ideology.

A primary concern of this family was the religious development of the children. If they grew up to marry Catholics and remain supportive and active parishioners, the parents were considered successful parents.



THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

GENERAL INTRODUCTION, CONT'D

TODAY'S CATHOLIC FAMILY

It might have two parents.

Slightly more than half of Catholic families will find both parents Catholic.

There are fewer children.

Mom will work outside the home sometime during the child-rearing years.

The parish is not the center of family life. The Catholic family depends on society both economically and socially.

Sunday liturgy, confession, and religion class are not as important as they once were.

Less than one-fourth of the nation's Catholics are enrolled in Catholic schools. This varies from area to area.

There is an ever-decreasing amount of parent-child contact. Divorce, absentee parents because of job demands, availability of current technology and increased activity schedules on the part of children cut severely into parent-child time together.

Parents have little control over influences on children today. Although parents remain the primary influence in the early years, peer influence takes over at age 12 and television, movies, music and communication technology remain the pervasive child shapers today.

Families are experiencing a rapid, even frenetic pace of life. In the average family, the calendar determines communication time, prayer time, and socialization.

Families are not automatically supportive of the pastor, staff, or parish ideology. They question decisions and often change parishes if they find the liturgy, the educational structure or the staff not to their liking.

The primary concern of today's Catholic parents is not whether their children marry Catholics and stay within the church, but that their children grow up with values, see marriage as a worthy institution, and are motivated toward career goals. With chemical dependency, depression and suicide, and non-marital relationships so prevalent and attractive to today's young people, parents simply have many pressing concerns that seem to pale the importance of a Catholic marriage. Since this removes the visible factor of parental success from Catholic parenting, Catholic parents aren't sure what a good Catholic parent must do or be today. The



THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

The rationale for a family perspective as a pastoral strategy is that *family life is so important in itself that it needs the ongoing support of the Church*. Family life is fundamental to the healthy life of the Church and society. A family perspective is rooted in the challenge of John Paul II as he stated in *Familiaris Consortio*: “No plan for organized pastoral work at any level must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral area of the family.” #70 Using a family perspective in planning, implementing, and evaluating policies, programs, ministries, and services means two things.

First, the family perspective means viewing individuals in the context of their family relationships and their other social relationships. As a systems orientation, a family perspective is a lens that focuses on the interaction between individuals, their families, and social situations. For example, rather than seeing a frail elderly person as an isolated individual who needs help, a family perspective assesses what kinds of supportive relationships that person has (or lacks) from family, friends, church, and neighborhood institutions.

Secondly, the family perspective suggests using family relationships as a criterion to assess the impact of the Church’s and society’s policies, programs, ministries and services. As a criterion to assess ministry, a family perspective provides a means to examine and systematically adjust policies, program design, and service delivery. Its goal is to incorporate sensitivity to families and to promote the partnership, strengths, and resources of participating families. A family perspective in ministry does not mean establishing another church office or a new level of bureaucracy to carry out such evaluation. However, it does mean calling all ministries to undertake this critical process.

At the foundation of a family perspective are four elements that touch the very heart of contemporary family life. Bringing a family perspective to bear in ministry means keeping these four elements in mind when planning, implementing and evaluating policies, programs, ministries and services.

THE FIRST ELEMENT: THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF FAMILY LIFE

The family has a unique identity and mission that permeates its tasks and responsibilities.



THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE, CONT'D

The family is an intimate community of persons bound together by blood, marriage, or adoption, for the whole of life. In our Catholic tradition, the family proceeds from marriage - an intimate, exclusive, permanent and faithful partnership of husband and wife.

This vision is rooted in the covenantal love of Jesus Christ. It holds that the family “constitutes a special revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too can and should be called the domestic church.” FC, #21

This vision proclaims that family life is sacred and that family activities are holy. It also proposes a unique family mission. It places the family at the service of building up God’s kingdom in history. This mission also calls families to protect and reveal their intimate community of life and love.

This vision and mission, in turn, empower families to undertake four specific tasks for the good of the Church and society.

1. The family is to form an intimate union of persons.
2. The family is to serve life both physically by bringing children into the world and spiritually by handing on values and traditions as well as developing the potential of each member to serve life at every age.
3. The family is to participate in the development of society by becoming a community of social training and hospitality, as well as a community of political involvement and activity.
4. The family is to share in the life and mission of the Church in becoming a believing and evangelizing community, a community in dialogue with God, and a community at the service of humanity.

To involve itself in the contemporary situation, the Church needs first of all, to reflect on its own vision of family life. Any call for partnership with families depends on the recognition of the value, dignity, and mission of the domestic church. A family perspective incorporates a vision of family that empowers families to realize their identity, mission, and tasks.

THE SECOND ELEMENT: THE FAMILY AS DEVELOPING SYSTEM

The family is not a collection of individuals, but a living and developing system whose members are essentially interconnected. A family perspective assumes that an individual lives connected to others and not in isolation. Among the most important of these relationships are familial ones. They follow set rules

THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE, CONT'D

that establish roles and patterns of interaction so the family can function. These roles and patterns create a positive sense of family identity and promote satisfying and fulfilling relationships among family members. They also facilitate family unity and individual development and contribute to the family's ability to deal effectively with stress. These roles and patterns are rooted in one's family of origin.

Different kinds of change are also a part of every family's life. Any change in the family, individual, or community affects these roles and patterns, which in turn affects the stability of the family and of each member. Likewise, as families normally grow and develop, as well as encounter events such as death, unemployment, and sickness, they face predictable and unavoidable periods of transition: thus, all families face similar tasks and challenges. The ways in which a family responds to these challenges influence the degree of success it will experience in subsequent challenges.

The parish needs to extend its hospitality to every kind of family and to the family at every stage of its life. The parish needs to invite all to hear the Good News and listen with an open heart and open mind to families as they struggle with the complexities of today's living.

THE THIRD ELEMENT: FAMILY DIVERSITY

The influence of societal trends and diversity in structure, economic status, special needs and ethnic and religious heritage affect the roles and activities of families today.

Families are not all alike. Today, they are characterized by diverse structures, needs, economic status, and cultural, ethnic, and religious heritages, and by how they are affected by social change. The result is that families in our nation differ greatly in their values, perceptions, styles, customs, rituals, social norms, shared meanings, lifestyles and ways of perceiving the world. Because of these differences, families establish their own roles, responsibilities and patterns of interactions.

A family perspective names and celebrates the uniqueness in each family. It ensures that policies, programs, ministries and services take family diversity into account.

THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE, CONT'D

THE FOURTH ELEMENT: THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN FAMILIES & SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Partnerships need to be formed between families and the institutions that share family responsibilities.

Historically, families and kinship groups have taken responsibility for their own basic needs and functions. In the last century, however, many family responsibilities have been shared, transferred, or assumed by public and private institutions. As a result, families and their members spend a great deal of their time, energy, and resources coping with the institutions that now share their responsibilities and coordinate the many services they receive. The policies and programs of many institutions tend to complicate and fragment family life. A family perspective establishes a working relationship, a partnership, between families and those institutions that participate in family responsibilities.

It is essential for the Church to support positive developments, look for new ways to help families, and unearth the resources that enable families to move from crisis to growth, from stress to strength. The call for a family perspective also demands that the Church look to its own structures, and examine how these truly help or hinder the family life of its members.

PARISH STRATEGIES FOR A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

The first question a parish needs to discuss is: are families envisioned as a support to the parish and its programs or are the the parish and its programs a support to the family? This is more than mere word play. It is central to the whole concept of family ministry. If the pastoral staff, parish council, and education program truly view as their goal the revitalization of a strong faith within the family, then efforts and resources will be directed first toward that goal. If, however, they give it verbal primacy while continuing to allocate resources and personnel toward programs within the parish, they are subtly telling parents they are convinced neither of the parents' primacy nor of their competency in becoming the first and foremost faith nourishers of their children.

THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

PARISH AND THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

If the parish views renewed family faith as its first goal, then all of its educational efforts should be designed with this in mind, whether they take place in a total family context, a weekly instruction program for children, or the parish school. A religious education program that does not engage and inflame family faith at home remains child and subject centered, not family centered. The parish must create new ways of involving the family at home through their programs. It might almost be said that the first purpose of the program is to enrich the faith climate at home. As a minimum, it must let parents know that the enrollment of their children in the program presumes that they are actively interested in becoming more vital faith nourishers themselves. It follows that these parents can be expected to pledge themselves to prayer and faith formation efforts at home, to attend parenting and renewal of faith classes themselves, and to take an active part in planning, teaching, and ministering to other families in areas in which they are competent. This will begin to challenge parents who feel they have fulfilled their responsibility to their children by enrolling them in the school or religious education and their responsibility to the parish by paying tuition.

But its real value is to the family itself. It will utilize the very educational systems that sometimes take on parental responsibility to revitalize the first faith community, the home. In this way, the parish can come to grips with the familiar dilemma of espousing family-centered faith while continuing to spend its time and resources on subject and child-centered instruction.

To assist parents as primary educators of their children, parishes are expected to be attentive and hospitable to the special needs, circumstances and composition of family life today. For catechesis to succeed, parish leadership must support faith formation in each home. The following recommendations provide some direction for pastors and catechetical leaders in assisting families with their responsibilities. Each parish can encourage, support and foster faith in the domestic church by:

- Providing marriage enrichment for couples throughout the marital years;
- Providing parents opportunities for growth in Christian parenting;
- Preparing parents, godparents, sponsors and the liturgical assembly to assume their proper roles for Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation;

THE FAMILY - THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

PARISH AND THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE, CONT'D

Planning and hosting regular family catechetical events, inclusive of the various types of families in the parish community and attentive to the demands placed on families today.

These events should:

- be seasonally appropriate, according to the liturgical year;
- assist parents in sacramental preparation of their children;
- offer concrete ways for families to form faith at home.

Provide ways for each household in the parish to participate in:

- daily prayer and spiritual development;
- Sunday Eucharist with the parish community;
- celebration of the sacraments with the parish community;
- social justice & works of charity in the parish and community.

Encourage family-based catechesis through:

- bulletin inserts, informational flyers, seasonal blessings and prayers and other occasional materials;
- programs for home-based family catechesis;
- maintaining a parish library, reading rack and subscriptions to appropriate materials for families;
- support, resources, and information for parents choosing home- schooling for catechesis.

Incorporate family and adult catechesis with

- child-oriented programs
- providing initial catechesis for families who are uncatechized or re-catechizing those returning to active faith.

Promoting small Christian communities which help and support parents in their own faith journey

Religious educators are called to broaden their perspective to see students in light of their families. Finding ways to nourish and support the families of students lets parents know they are not alone in their role as ministers of the domestic church.

