

What Catholics need to know about making their homes a domestic church

The Catholic presence stretches around the globe, and its numbers are increasing worldwide, according to statistics from the 2011 *Annuario Pontificio* (“pontifical yearbook”). Approximately 1.18 billion belong to the big Church, the Body of Christ. In many cases they are also living in one of the countless little “domestic churches” all throughout the world.

But what actually constitutes a “domestic church”? Let’s take a quick look at the beginning of the Church’s founder’s life. Jesus himself was born into the heart of a family, a little domestic church consisting of his mother, Mary, his foster father, St. Joseph, and himself. Wherever the Holy Family set up their home – in the stable in Bethlehem for a time, in Egypt or in Nazareth – their domestic church moved right along with them simply because their domestic church consisted of the three of them.

Down through the ages, as people were converted and became believers, “they desired that ‘their whole household’ should also be saved. These families who became believers were islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1655).

Building up Church

Just as the early Christian families were an exemplary example to others around them, Catholic families today can build up their own domestic churches and strive to be “islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.”

“Every home is called to become a ‘domestic church’ in which family life is completely centered on the lordship of Christ

and the love of husband and wife mirrors the mystery of Christ's love for the Church, his bride," Pope Benedict XVI said in his Feb. 7, 2007, general audience remarks.

These are wonderful ideals to emulate. However, because of the large number of single-parent families today, we know that not every Catholic family consists of a mother and a father. Broken families seem more like a norm rather than an exception. Grandparents are raising their grandchildren in many households. And we also know that even in traditional families, not every Catholic husband and wife "mirrors the mystery of Christ's love for the Church, his bride." Even so, our Church summons Catholic families, in all their shapes and forms, to live in this virtuous way. Each unique domestic church can be a stable, loving and holy environment.

A domestic church begins with the Sacrament of Matrimony – man and woman become husband and wife. Pope John Paul II spoke of a Catholic couple's call to holiness within that sacrament when he said, "Marriage is an act of will that signifies and involves a mutual gift, which unites the spouses and binds them to their eventual souls, with whom they make up a sole family – a domestic church."

He also explained the husband and wife's responsibility to recognize and to act upon their role as "givers of life" in his encyclical [Evangelium Vitae](#) ("The Gospel of Life"):

"As the domestic church, the family is summoned to proclaim, celebrate, and serve the Gospel of life. This is a responsibility which first concerns married couples, called to be givers of life, on the basis of an ever greater awareness of the meaning of procreation as a unique event which clearly reveals that human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift. In giving origin to a new life, parents recognize that the child 'as the fruit of their mutual gift of love, is in turn, a gift for both of them, a gift flows from them'" (No. 92).

As babies are born and families grow, the parents, considered the first and foremost educators by the Church, are called to pass on the Catholic faith to their children. Blessed Mother Teresa explained this experience in the domestic church very simply. She said, "The best and surest way to learn the love of Jesus is through the family."

Curriculum of love

Catholic parents can look to the Catechism of the Catholic Church for direction regarding their responsibilities to impart the faith to their children. There we learn, "The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called 'the domestic church,' a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (No. 1666).

Within the walls of the domestic church, children learn about their faith through their parents' and grandparents' word and example, as well as within the many growing pains and nitty-gritty details of everyday life as a family grows together in holiness.

Everyday life in the family may seem filled with a lot of ordinariness and at times a bit of chaos. Yet, right there along with the normal routines and day-to-day occurrences of sibling rivalry, teenaged angst and sometimes grouchy spouses is woven a paradigm of human enrichment pointing us to a narrow path that leads to heaven.

Catholic teachings open our eyes to the remarkable goings on within a growing faithful Catholic family, helping us recognize that there is a heck of a lot more happening in our day-to-day lives than what meets the eye.

"It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way 'by the

reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and self-denial and active charity.’ Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and ‘a school for human enrichment.’ Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life” (No. 1657).

Amazing! And we thought we were simply teaching our kids how to share, love and pray, potty training them, breaking up fights, functioning as lovingly as possible after sleepless nights, laying down the law, and rescuing them from far too many lurking dangers. But, in reality, it is within the domestic church that Catholic parents lay out a curriculum of fraternal love and forgiveness while helping the family to work out their salvation in the give-and-take of life in the family.

A high calling

Whether we live in a palace or a cave, Catholic parents have the awesome responsibility of raising their children to not only learn right from wrong, but to recognize that the real purpose of their lives in this world is to work out their salvation for the next world – their eternal lives. This has to be the No. 1 priority in raising Christian children. God provides the blessing of a family structure to accomplish this.

The Church teaches us, “Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among children. Hence, the family

is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs” (Declaration on Christian Education, [Gravissimum Educationis](#), No. 3).

Parents certainly have a high calling. We also learn from that same document: “The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.”

The Catechism tells us, “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for education in the virtues. This requires an apprenticeship in self-denial, sound judgment and self-mastery – the preconditions of all true freedom. Parents should teach their children to subordinate the ‘material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones’” (No. 2223).

As first and foremost educator, parents will ultimately be answering to God with regard to how their children have been educated. Yes, that means parents need to investigate all that is going on in their children’s education, not just at home, but also in their schools, both Catholic and public, and their religious education programs.

Eyes toward heaven

To help pave the way to heaven for the children, it’s essential for parents to establish an atmosphere of prayer in the home. They’ll first want to ground themselves in prayer, making it an integral part of their daily lives.

If children are raised in a household of prayer, prayer will become as natural as breathing to them and will indeed provide a secure foundation. Kids take cues from their best role models, their parents and grandparents. The example of prayers said in the morning and evening, for special intentions at

various times, and at the dinner table speaks volumes since children look to adults and learn their behaviors.

To help our family focus more on the sacred rather than the secular, we must bring something of the big Church into our little domestic church. We do that by placing sacred images around our home. Sacred art, icons, crucifixes, images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Holy Family, saints' pictures, sacramentals, holy-water fonts and even a prayer corner can adorn our homes. These holy items help stir the soul and lift our attention toward heaven and its rewards.

Nourishing bodies, souls

Dinnertime is a lot more than just about filling our bellies. It's a time to grow together as a family, creating memories and establishing traditions.

Our dinner conversations may not always be so profound and our children's behavior may not always be Hallmark picture perfect. Things happen, kids can get messy and loud, and we may lose our patience at times. We are human, after all. A growing family is a work in progress, and parents are wise to lower their expectations with regard to their children's behavior while still teaching them to show respect and practice their manners as best they can. Mealtimes are certainly those occasions when "tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule." Introducing prayer at the dinner table is not only beneficial, it's essential. Why not use the time wisely? You will have a captive audience, after all. After Grace Before Meals is said, you can add an Our Father, a Hail Mary and any special intentions. In just a few minutes time, you will have united your family in prayer.

God gives Christian families countless opportunities to earn grace throughout their daily lives within their domestic

church as they forge a blessed bond together and help one another come closer to their eternal reward. These families can become a beacon of light in our darkened world.

Domestic church traditions

The blessing of the home: Whether your domestic church is a house or an apartment, invite a priest to come to bless it, either when you first move in or at any time. In addition to blessing your home, you may enthrone your home to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Invite a priest to assist you with the enthronement or do it on your own by hanging up the images in your home and praying the following prayer together.

Act of family consecration: Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary, we consecrate ourselves and our entire family to you. We consecrate to you: our very being and all our life. All that we are. All that we have. And all that we love. To you we give our bodies, our hearts and our souls. To you we dedicate our home and our country. Mindful of this consecration, we promise you to live the Christian way by the practice of Christian virtues, with great regard for respect for one another. O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary, accept our humble confidence and this act of consecration by which we entrust ourselves and all our family to you. Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us. Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

Devotions: Praying the Rosary is a popular devotion for many Catholic families, who, through its mysteries, reflect on significant events in Scripture pertaining to Jesus and Mary. Wearing the brown scapular is a devotion whereby the person places himself or herself under the protection of the Blessed Mother.

Sacred images and sacramentals: A domestic church should be filled with sacred images and sacramentals. Holy pictures and crucifixes should be hung throughout. A holy-water font can be placed by the front door in order to bless oneself with holy water and remind you of your baptism. Holy water should be regularly sprinkled throughout the home.

Parental blessings: Parents can trace the Sign of the Cross with their thumb or forefinger on their child's forehead at any time while asking God to bless him or her.

Celebrate namedays: Celebrate your family's namedays, which are the days dedicated to each person's patron saint.

Follow the liturgical year: Families can pray the Liturgy of the Hours together.

Creating family traditions: Establish your own family traditions. Enjoy regular dinners together, connecting as a family, sharing and praying together. Incorporate a holy pilgrimage into the family vacation by visiting shrines.

A Prayer Corner

A few sacred tangible items placed in view makes praying more touchable for our kids. A prayer table or prayer corner set up in a gathering area of the home can help to draw our attention to the sacred rather than the secular.

In its explanation of favorable places for prayer and worship, the Catechism tells us, "For personal prayer, this can be a 'prayer corner' with Sacred Scriptures and icons, in order to be there, in secret, before our Father [Mt 6:6]. In a Christian family, this kind of little oratory fosters prayer in common" (No. 2691).

To create this prayer corner, simply place a small table in your dining room or living room, wherever best suits your needs. A beautiful icon or a crucifix can be hung on the wall above the table. A Bible, prayer books, holy water and basket

of rosary beads can be placed on the table. Children's books on saints or with Bible stories can fill a basket or bookshelf nearby. You might want your prayer table to reflect the various seasons in the liturgical year, adorning it with flowers on holy days or Marian feast days. A candle can be lighted or incense burned (with adult supervision) for family prayers, making the occasion of prayer more ceremonious.

Children can sit upon pillows or mats as they gather for morning or evening prayer or while listening to an age appropriate inspirational story. The kids can be encouraged to draw holy pictures to decorate the area. Prayer petitions can be scribbled on paper and placed on the prayer table.

This unique area will grow with your children as you replace the large wooden rosary beads with grown-up beads and swap out the little kid books for more mature ones. With a smidgen of time, some thought and prayer, you will have fashioned a little oratory for holy encounters, a place of refuge. Even when not in use, your prayer corner stands as a reminder of a holy reason for your days within the home.

We are family

The Church calls on families of all shapes and forms – not just those headed by a married Catholic mother and Catholic father – to make their homes a domestic church. Here is how some families are making that happen.

Single-parent household

Many domestic churches are headed by just one parent due to a spouse's passing or because of a divorce or separation. I myself was a single mother for many years and raised my children in the faith alone. As a single mother, rounding everybody up to get to Mass on time can be challenging. As well, tiptoeing in and out of Mass with a noisy youngster is difficult when you have other little ones and no one to assist you. I know this fact alone inhibits some single parents from

going to church.

Even though single-parent families are commonplace these days, we still live in a couple's world and that can be hard, too, for the single parent. I am extremely thankful for the gift of faith that strengthened me each day in my resolve to raise virtuous Catholic children despite my circumstances. The Catholic tradition handed down to me by my parents lived vibrantly in my heart and fueled my desire to raise my children well, and also reminded me that I was not alone after all. God was guiding me every step of the way.

Mixed-faith household

Being married to a non-Catholic can sometimes feel as if you are a single parent according to Sue Stratton, a mother of five with one on the way in Corinna, Maine. She finds shouldering the job of conveying the faith to her children alone extremely challenging and exhausting because her husband is a nonbeliever.

"After 15 years of marriage, I wonder if my faith will ever have an effect on my husband at all. I originally thought he would convert to the faith, but after years and watching him still hold pretty strong opinions about the Church, I fear it may never happen," she told OSV. "I will admit I pray almost every single night that God will bring my husband into the faith, because I so desperately want help raising the children in the faith."

To guide her children in the faith each day in her domestic church, Stratton fuels herself with prayer, the sacraments and Catholic camaraderie. She says, "It's my Catholic friends who help to keep the lamp burning." She wishes the Church would "focus more attention on the family" by encouraging them to help one another and having parishes offer families greater support.

Raising grandchildren

Maria Murphy became the legal guardian of her grandson William when he was 7 years old because his father died and his mother, Elizabeth, suffers from serious emotional problems. They live together at Murphy's home in Brookfield, Conn.

Murphy considers her role raising William, now 12, as "a wonderful part of my life – a new phase," she said. "He's a beautiful person, and I want to bring him up to be a healthy, happy, productive, holy and caring person." To gain encouragement and enjoy solidarity in raising William, she attends a weekly grandparent support group.

At times it's an uphill battle raising a grandchild because of age differences and dealing with a permissive culture.

"The others have cell phones and are allowed to do a lot more. The parents don't want to do as much for their children as I do," Murphy told OSV. "Things are so different from when my daughter Elizabeth grew up."

For a 70-year-old, raising a growing grandchild can be thoroughly exhausting. "If I didn't have my faith and couldn't talk to God or stop into church for daily Mass or a visit, I don't know how I would survive," she told OSV.

Praying in the domestic church

Simply put, "A family that prays together stays together" (Blessed Mother Teresa). Additionally, our Catechism tells us, "The Christian family is the first place for education in prayer" (No. 2694). We must endeavor to lay down a foundation of prayer in our domestic churches. It will undoubtedly be one of the most important things we will ever do as Christian parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Prayer comes from the depths of our hearts and stretches up like incense to reach God. It is through the gift of faith that we pray. The Holy Spirit teaches the faithful to pray in hope. We learn from the Psalms, "I waited, waited for the LORD; who bent down and heard my cry" (Ps 40:2). Love is at

the very core of prayer. So, we see that the theological virtues of faith, hope and love are tightly meshed together in the mystery of prayer.

To hand down the amazing gift of prayer to the family, we can start with our own example of praying in the company of our family, showing them that we can offer up prayers at any time, whether there is a particular need or just a desire to thank God for his many blessings.

As well, we should establish specific times to pray together as a family, such as: morning and evening prayers, a family Rosary (or a decade), and grace before and after meals (see sidebar below for more prayer suggestions).

A gentle approach to teaching prayer is preferred over a strict regimented one. We want to impress upon our children that prayer is, in reality, a personal conversation with God.

A valuable prayer lesson is in outwardly showing your Christian love for your spouse, your children, your neighbors and the world. Impress upon your children that they are loved by God and have been blessed with gifts to serve others too.

Setting up a prayer table or prayer corner provides a tangible way for the family to focus on prayer (see sidebar above for instructions). And all throughout the daily give-and-take within the family, dealing with inconveniences, differences and occasional discord, the family learns the valuable lesson of offering it all to God right in the nitty-gritty details of ordinary life, lovingly helping one another get to heaven.

Prayers

Family Consecration: Jesus, Mary, Joseph! Graciously accept our family, which we dedicate and consecrate to you. Be pleased to protect, guard, and keep it in sincere faith, in peace and in the harmony of Christian charity. By conforming ourselves to the divine model of your family, may we all

attain to eternal happiness.

Prayer for a Family: Lord, bless our family, all of us now together, those far away, all who are gone back to you. May we know joy. May we bear our sorrows in patience. Let love guide our understanding of each other. Let us be grateful to each other. We have all made each other what we are. O family of Jesus, watch over our family. Amen.

Morning Offering: O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you all my prayers, works, joys and sufferings of this day, for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all my relatives and friends and in particular of the Holy Father.

Grace Before Meals: Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Prayer After Meals: We give you thanks for all your gifts, almighty God, living and reigning now and forever. Amen.

Evening Prayer: Hear us, Lord, and send your angel from heaven to visit and protect, to comfort and defend all who live in this house. Amen.

Family Prayer: O dear Jesus, I humbly implore you to grant your special graces to our family. May our home be the shrine of peace, purity, love, labor and faith. I beg you, dear Jesus, to protect and bless all of us, absent and present, living and dead.

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