

Your Catholic home

The Catholic Faith, always and everywhere, is an embodied faith. It's a faith of sacraments and sacramentals, of liturgical rituals and liturgical gestures. It's a faith that recognizes that all creation is made by God, loved by God and speaks of God. Matter, in this world, always possesses the potential to be an occasion of grace.

Catholics know this. We feel it in our bones, even if we can't articulate it. That's why, when we walk into a Catholic church, we expect to see what we believe reflected back to us, not just in the sacred liturgy, but in the building itself – in the height of its ceilings and the cleanliness of its carpet, in the sacred art in the sanctuary and the placement of the sacred vessels on the altar. In effect, we expect to see our faith made incarnate in plaster, glass and marble, with the very walls proclaiming the glory of God.

We should expect to see something similar when we walk into a Catholic home.

Sunday Mass, after all, isn't the only time we're called to worship God. We're also called to give him praise and thanksgiving upon our waking and upon our sleeping, upon our sitting down to eat and upon our rising up to work. Likewise, lessons in faith, hope and charity aren't exclusively learned in the pews. Far more often, they're learned in the home.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, the family home is considered a "domestic church ... a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (No. 1666).

The domestic church isn't a lesser church than the parish church; it's an extension of it. Which, at least in theory, is why many of the same principles for housekeeping and decorating apply there. A Catholic home should still reflect

the Catholic Faith: The truths the Church proclaims should be physically embodied in material ways.

In practice, that doesn't require adorning our living rooms with stained-glass windows and life-size marble statues. Nor does it entail keeping our homes perpetually spotless, with gleaming brass and oiled wood. Homes are meant to be lived in, and toddlers have their own ideas about polished brass.

So, what does make a home Catholic, not just in its inhabitants but in its actual appearance?

A Catholic home is ...

... well-maintained

In the Garden, God called Adam and Eve to exercise stewardship over all creation. They were to till it and keep it, ordering the natural world and ensuring God's creation remained in ship-shape condition. The same call applies to us and to our little corners of creation. Whether our homes are large or small, in the city or in the country, they constitute our "garden," and we are to care for them, exercising good stewardship over what God has entrusted to us and teaching our children to do the same.

This doesn't mean a Catholic home has to look like a Pottery Barn catalogue come to life. If Better Homes and Gardens doesn't want to feature your home in its next issue, you're not falling down on the job. In reality, a homeowner's (or tenant's) work is never done. There will always be doorknobs that need fixing, lawns that need mowing, and floors that need cleaning. Perfection, without unlimited funds and a full-time staff, is impossible.

Fortunately, God doesn't ask us to do the impossible. He just asks us to do what we can.

You don't have to be wealthy to scatter seeds in the spring that will bloom in the summer. Nor do you need to be flush with cash to clean mold and mildew off bathroom walls. Little acts of stewardship go a long way. They also save both time and money in the end.

For example, lawns mowed regularly require less work than lawns mowed only occasionally. And leaky roofs repaired immediately cost much less than leaky roofs ignored indefinitely. Routine cleaning and maintenance give credence to the adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

No matter how grand or humble our home may be, all we possess is a gift.

One day, like the steward of Matthew 25, we will be held accountable for what we did with those gifts ... which adds a whole new layer of urgency to dusting.

A Catholic home is ...

... personal

Everything created by God reveals something about God. Oceans speak of his infinite love, mountains of his enduring faithfulness and hummingbirds of his abiding concern for the smallest details of his handiwork. In those ways and a billion more, creation makes the Creator known.

Our homes should do the same for us – men and women made in the image of the Creator. They should incarnate who we are: what we love, do and desire. They should tell the story of us, just as our parish churches tell the story of salvation history and the cosmic temple – creation – tells the story of the Creator.

Telling that story doesn't require an interior designer or a trust fund. It just requires a little thought. Books can line the walls of a bibliophile's house. Favorite pots and pans can be put on display in the kitchen of an avid cook. Pictures of family hikes and camping trips, as well as birthdays and Christmases past can go up on living room walls. Favorite poems can be typed out and framed. Baby clothes can hang from decorative hooks. Grandma's plates can rest on a dining room sideboard.

Whatever you choose to do, it's important to remember that the goal of decorating your home isn't to impress. It doesn't matter if your choices pass muster with HGTV. What matters is that wherever you look, you see things that make you happy. Meaningless knickknacks, trinkets and impersonal collectibles can have a place in the home in moderation, of course, but often impersonable items that we collect over time simply become unnecessary clutter that detract attention from the more important things on display ... such as children's artwork or photos of family, friends or a memorable vacation.

A Catholic home is ...

... full of sacramentals

The Catholic Faith isn't a faith lived primarily inside the four walls of a parish. It's a faith primarily lived in the world – at work, on the streets and in the home. That's one of the reasons why the Church gives us sacramentals – rosaries and holy water, devotional images and statues, crucifixes, icons and so much more.

All those sacramentals serve as gentle reminders of our faith, linking us back to God as we go about the business of our day. They help us think of him, thank him and rely on him. As such, they become conduits of grace, channeling God's help and love

to us in the midst of our hectic lives.

Accordingly, in a Catholic home, these sacramentals deserve pride of place. Crucifixes over doorways and bedposts remind us that we live under the sign of the cross. A holy water font and image of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the front door help us call upon God's grace as we come and go. Prayer cards on the kitchen windowsill help us offer up the daily grind of cooking and cleaning, while outside the home, grottos that house a statue of Mary or another beloved saint announce that we've placed our homes under God's protection.

While sacramentals should have a place in every room, the Catechism of the Catholic Church suggests that families set aside one corner in particular to display their most beloved sacred objects (CCC, No. 2691). This family altar or, as the Catechism calls it, little "oratory," can become a place to pray alone or together. It doesn't have to be made of marble or stone. A small wooden table, fireplace mantle or shelf will do.

The little oratory's value doesn't come from its grandeur; its value comes from the simple act of giving sacred objects a place of honor in the home, which reminds us to give the realities to which those objects point a place of honor in our lives.

A Catholic home is ...

... full of beauty

When God created a home for man and woman, he filled it with beauty – with flowers and butterflies, lakes and forests, golden leaves and red-streaked skies. He is, the catechism tells us, "the author of beauty," and the beauty he gave us in creation reflects his own "infinite beauty" (Nos. 2129, 341). Because of that, beauty can become an occasion of grace. It

schools the spirit to know and love God.

Even in the catacombs, Christians recognized this, and wherever the faithful gathered, artists painted beautiful sacred images upon the walls. Once Christians could begin building basilicas of their own, beauty became even more central to Catholic life, with churches both large and small catechizing the faithful through their form nearly as much as through their function.

Every Catholic home has the potential to administer a similar catechesis.

Regardless of where we live or how simply we live, every domestic church should still strive to be beautiful in some way. And there are many possible ways.

A vase of yellow daffodils on the kitchen table or a potted violet blooming in the windowsill, a candle burning brightly by the entryway, or a work of art hanging on the dining room wall, a beautiful old dresser in the dining room, or a pretty coverlet on the bed – all those little details and more bring beauty into a home.

Likewise, a \$20 can of paint can do wonders for a room. So too can the right throw pillows or a shelf full of books.

Just scrubbing the floor until it shines or shutting off the television and sending teenagers outside to pull weeds can spruce up the domestic church. There is, after all, beauty in cleanliness and order, as well as in art and architecture.

Fortunately for us, that kind of beauty can be had on the cheap. So too can other kinds of beauty. Thrift stores abound with lovely castoff objects. Reproductions of the great masters can be purchased online for a song. Packets of zinnia seeds sell for \$1.99 at Lowe's.

No matter how limited our finances, sufficient imagination and

a little time can transform the poorest of homes and the humblest of spaces. If we have the desire to bring beauty in our homes and the will to do it, a little glimmer of God is never out of reach.

A Catholic home is ...

... free of clutter

Beautiful objects are good. Sacred objects are good. Personal mementoes are good. But too much of a good thing is possible.

A house overrun by things – whether statues of the Blessed Virgin or stacks of useless papers – has the same effect on the soul as the TV blaring, the phone ringing and the radio blasting. It overwhelms us and distracts us, making it difficult for our souls to find rest.

The same goes for closets overflowing with clothes that don't fit and basements jam-packed with castoff toys and unused sporting equipment. While others go without, we hold on to too much, robbing ourselves of the grace that comes with giving generously, as well as the peace that comes with order and simplicity.

Throughout the Church's history, innumerable religious lived their lives in white-walled cells with few possessions. They strove to remain detached from the things of the world, holding on to nothing they didn't need and even going without a few things they did. In part, they lived that way out of a desire to cultivate a deeper and more abiding trust in God's provision. They also lived that way in order to remind themselves of what truly mattered in life: loving God and loving their neighbors. Material objects can be a means to those ends. They can serve love. They have their place in a faith-filled life, and when understood in the context of a Catholic worldview, they can enrich our understanding of God

and our relationship with him. But when we hold onto material goods too tightly or place their acquisition and care above the more important tasks of giving and serving, material objects can get in the way of love.

Accordingly, giving away clothes we no longer wear and household items we no longer use, valuing memories more than memorabilia and filing papers away instead of stacking them on the dining room table are all small ways lay people can imitate the holy simplicity of religious life and learn the same lessons from detachment as the monks of old. Such imitation helps us keep our priorities straight and our spirits free to do the loving and serving God calls us to do. Which, in the end, is what truly makes a Catholic home.

Need help eliminating some of the clutter in your home? Check out these [six questions](#) from Emily Stimpson.

This article originally appeared in [OSV Newsweekly](#).