

The Christian Household as School of Discipleship:

Reflections on the Ecclesial Contributions of the Christian Household to the Larger Church

If our conference has taught us anything it is the importance of adopting a contextual approach to the study of the domestic church. Although we may treat the “domestic church” as a theological concept, concrete experiences of the domestic church which inform that concept emerge out of diverse culturally informed realizations of marriage and family. My own reflections are drawn from such a particular cultural and ecclesial context, namely the Roman Catholic experience of church in North America.

Of the many ecclesiological insights and trajectories that emerged out of the Second Vatican Council, one of the most neglected has been the domestic church. In spite of its popularity in pastoral ministry there have been relatively few theological explorations of the topic, a lacuna that this conference will go a long way toward redressing. I would like to begin my paper by exploring some of the reasons for this theological neglect. I will then suggest that a truly ecclesiological analysis of the category of domestic church must attend to the potential ecclesial significance of domesticity. Finally, I will suggest some ways in which the domestic church can make decisive contributions to the universal church.

I. REASONS FOR THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL NEGLECT OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY AS DOMESTIC CHURCH

There are a number of reasons for the theological neglect of the “domestic church” as an ecclesiological category.

The New Testament Treatment of the Family

The first difficulty, which doubtless has already been discussed in this conference, is the biblical tradition's complex treatment of the family. The teaching of Jesus virtually exploded the category of the family in the ancient world. Jesus taught that under God's rule, kinship relations are to be subordinated to the spiritual bonds of discipleship. The gospel of Jesus Christ stresses the creation of a new family, a new household—the household of believers. Our truest identity is discovered in the recognition that God is our Father and Mother and that we are children of God. All other relations are subordinated to this one. This teaching of Jesus need not be understood as the renunciation of the family (though Jesus apparently envisioned that some might do so “for the sake of the kingdom”). However, it does suggest that the theological and ecclesiological significance of the family must be reinterpreted in the light of the call to discipleship.

An Insufficiently Ecclesial Understanding of Marriage

A second reason for the relative neglect of the category of domestic church is the consequence of the Western canonical and sacramental understandings of marriage in the Catholic tradition. Ladislav Orsy contends that Catholicism's post-Tridentine emphasis on marriage as a legal contract between the spouses and the consequent doctrinal position that the spouses themselves are the ministers of the sacrament has had the unintended effect of de-ecclesializing (my term, not his) the sacrament of marriage. By contrast, the Eastern Church, by highlighting the role of the priest in the administration of the sacrament, treats marriage as an ecclesial consecration of sorts, with an explicit ecclesial mission, where the Eastern “crowning” of the married couple might even serve as an analogue to ordination¹.

Of course the re-ecclesializing of marriage and family, although much needed, can lead to yet a third difficulty, namely the view of the domestic church as a mirror of the parish or diocese.

¹LADISLAV ORSY, “In Praise of Communio,” in *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2009, 1-15, at p. 13.

The Family as a Mirror of the Parish

There are some in pastoral ministry who advocate the view of the Christian family as a domestic church but who adopt a tendency evident in the patristic tradition in which the family was thought to mirror the life and structures of the diocese or parish. This is reflected, for example, in the patristic attribution of a quasi-episcopal role to the parents². The patristic use of the phrase, “church in miniature” can suggest that the Eucharistic community of the diocese or parish is being offered as the prime analogue for attributing ecclesiality to the Christian household.

We see this today in those treatments of the family as domestic church which strive to mimic the parish in the performance of religious rituals in the home and the prominent display of “family altars” and religious art in the home. I do not wish to diminish the value of family prayer and religious art in the home, both of which play a significant role in my own household. My concern lies more in warding off the danger of reducing the ecclesiality of the Christian household to those ecclesial elements typical of parish and diocesan life. Wendy Wright noted this danger several decades ago in her beautiful exploration of family spirituality, *Sacred Dwelling*:

That the Christian family is understood to be an authentic, and indeed, the primary unit of church does not necessarily mean that the family mirrors in miniature the institutional church in its structure or simply that family members embrace official teaching....Rather to be the domestic church means that the family, in the uniqueness of its way-of-being-in-the-world (as an intimate physical, psychological, and spiritual entity) is an authentic community of believers. What the members of the family know to be their own experience of the sacred in the particularities of marriage, sexual intimacy, procreation, parenting; the building, sustaining and decay

² See MICHAEL FAHEY, “The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II,” *Concilium* (1995), 85-92.

of intimate relationships; the struggles of providing, sheltering, and feeding--this experience is authentic and must be part of the knowledge of the gathered church³.

Wright locates the ecclesial dimension of family life not in religious objects, liturgical feasts or practices imported from the larger church but in the basic rhythms central to authentic family life: welcoming, letting go, recreation, conversation, resolving disputes, etc. All of these activities can be called ecclesial within a household of faith because all can be manifestations of the paschal mystery, the dying and rising in Christ which we celebrate in the Christian community.

The final reason for the contemporary ambivalence regarding the domestic church as an ecclesiological concept lies in the tendency to conceive the domestic church as constituted exclusively by the sacrament of marriage.

Is the Domestic Church Sacramentally Grounded in Matrimony or Baptism?

The key passages at Vatican II and in the corpus of Pope John Paul II presumed that the sacrament of matrimony offers the sacramental foundation of the domestic church. Contemporary theologians like Joseph Atkinson have continued to tie the domestic church to the sacrament of marriage by folding the domestic church exclusively to John Paul II's theology of the body and its emphasis on the nuptial shape of God's salvific offer⁴. I do not wish to deny the ecclesial community that can be created by the sacrament of marriage. Indeed, I have written elsewhere of the importance of retaining the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament of marriage⁵. However, fresh insight into the notion of domestic church

³ WENDY WRIGHT, *Sacred Dwelling*, New York, Crossroad, 1990, pp. 24-5.

⁴ JOSEPH C. ATKINSON, "Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), 592-604.

⁵ See RICHARD R. GAILLARDETZ, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage* (Revised and expanded edition), Liguori, MO, Liguori Publications, 2007; idem, "The Sacrament of Marriage: Three Dimensions of a Daring Vocation," *Liguorian* 92 (May-June, 2004), 10-15.

might be gleaned if a theology of the domestic church gave more attention to its sacramental foundations in Christian baptism⁶.

For example, Pope Paul VI offered a different if undeveloped trajectory for considering the domestic church in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi*. In one of his most theologically mature documents, Paul VI treated the Christian family in the context of the church's work of evangelization and presented the evangelizing mission of the Christian family as rooted in baptism. The American bishops, following the lead of Pope Paul VI, also privileged the sacrament of baptism in their document "Follow the Way of Love," writing: "Baptism brings all Christians into union with God. Your family life is sacred because family relationships confirm and deepen this union and allow the Lord to work through you"⁷. Starting with baptism allows us to place in the foreground, not questions of membership in the domestic church but rather on the ways in which one's baptismal call is realized in the household.

II. THE ECCLESIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF "DOMESTICITY"

If the concept of the domestic church is to be ecclesiologically helpful, it will require greater attention to the very notion of "domesticity". By "domesticity" I mean that complex of relations and practices that constitute a functioning Christian household. This analysis would certainly embrace the relations and practices enacted in sacramental marriage, as well as single-parent, mixed and blended families. However, it also allows us to consider other forms of Christian community characterized by a commitment to a common domicile.

⁶ For a consideration of this issue see FLORENCE CAFFREY BOURG, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches*, Notre Dame, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2004, especially chapter six.

⁷ <http://www.usccb.org/laity/follow.shtml> .

Consider, for example, the L'Arche communities founded by Jean Vanier⁸. These communities consist of large groups of the developmentally challenged who share a common household. These communities are, I contend, true domestic churches defined by a commitment to share a common "domicile" lived within the demands and horizon of the Christian gospel. A second example would be a Catholic Worker house. To be sure, many Christian households will continue to be constituted by sacramental marriage, but the ecclesial significance of the notion of domestic church will be enhanced if we bring into the foreground of our theological reflection the notion of shared domesticity itself. The nineteenth century American Protestant theologian, Horace Bushnell, in his book *Christian Nurture*, contended that "religion never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic"⁹.

This consideration of domesticity is enriched by the sociological understanding of a household as a social institution as that term is employed by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in their book *The Good Society*. In that study of the role of social institutions in sustaining a public communal life, Bellah and his colleagues define a social institution as a set of patterned relations which mediate values and influence behavior. Bellah *et al.*, write:

Institutions...mediate our ultimate moral (and religious) commitments. Not only are our moral and spiritual beliefs and attitudes learned in institutional contexts (however informal the contexts and however we may modify those beliefs and attitudes in terms of our individual experiences), but institutions themselves are premised on moral (and religious) understandings, what sociologists call ultimate values¹⁰.

⁸ JEAN VANIER, *Community and Growth*, New York, Paulist Press, 1989; MICHAEL DOWNEY, *A Blessed Weakness: The Spirit of Jean Vanier and L'Arche*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986.

⁹ HORACE BUSHNELL, *Christian Nurture* (1861; reprint), Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 1994, p. 63, as discussed in Bourg, p. 11.

¹⁰ BELLAH, *The Good Society*, p. 288. This volume includes a helpful appendix entitled, "Institutions in Sociology and Public Philosophy." See also MARY DOUGLAS, *How Institutions Think*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1986.

The domesticity of the household functions as a social institution because it embraces so many of the most basic elements of human existence. It is in the domestic household that we eat, sleep, bathe, get dressed, relax and converse with others. In the context of the household we learn basic social conventions, from table manners to the demands of hospitality toward guests. In the household we learn how to be accountable for our lives; we learn when we are expected for dinner (or to prepare dinner); we learn what chores and other miscellaneous responsibilities are assigned to us and how the smooth functioning of the household depends on the fulfillment of those chores and responsibilities. More importantly, in many households we learn about the possibilities for committed, appropriately vulnerable relationship with others and the privileges and responsibilities that those relationships bring. It is in this nexus of patterned relationships which constitutes the household that we can better understand the image of the Christian household as a “school of discipleship”.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be formed in the ways and values of the kingdom with which Jesus was preoccupied. Jesus taught in parables and modeled in his actions the prodigal love of God, the scandalously inclusive and generous justice which typified God’s reign. Jesus’ teaching on the reign of God was much more than a set of precepts to be memorized, it was nothing less than an alternative way of life, a new mode of existence. Initiation into this new mode of existence cannot be done in a private manner. The ecclesial significance of household domesticity has been given new attention by way of the rise of virtue ethics and the considerations of the church as a virtue community.

As virtue ethicists remind us, we do not become virtuous by memorizing rules or church maxims. We become virtuous by being engaged, at as many levels as possible, with other people who live the life of virtue. Gospel values are not passed on so much by explicit moral catechesis as by the way in which a set of values has shaped basic human interactions. And so it is with the Christian household. Basic gospel values are internalized through our most mundane domestic interactions. When our household

members learn how decisions are made and conflicts resolved, how work gives way to healthy play, how household tasks are undertaken out of a sense of commitment to the welfare of others, how affection and encouragement dominate household interactions, how challenges, corrections and even discipline are engaged in ways that never demean but rather affirm the dignity of all—those household members are being schooled in the life of discipleship. They become a Christian virtue community.

The American bishops acknowledged this, writing:

The profound and ordinary moments of daily life--mealtimes, workdays, vacations, expressions of love and intimacy, household chores, caring for a sick child or elderly parent, and even conflicts over things like how to celebrate holidays, discipline children or spend money--all are the threads from which you can weave a pattern of holiness¹¹.

As the bishops' statement suggests, Christian households that wish to reflect on their character as domestic church must go beyond thinking about grace at meals to much more basic household activities.

This attention to the nature of domestic life understood as a set of quotidian, patterned human interactions follows from the conviction that in much of the developed Western world these quotidian domestic practices are being threatened by a hyper-technologized, consumerist culture. Although I cannot explore this in any detail, Albert Borgmann's insightful analysis of the way in which technology has reshaped the ecology of the home is particularly pertinent. Borgmann describes a qualitative shift in modern technology characterized by the dominance of the "device"¹². Unlike earlier forms of still often sophisticated technology, the device offers us the goods that we desire but in a manner that is invisible

¹¹ NCCB, "Follow the Way of Love," *Origins* 23 (December 2, 1993), p. 436.

¹² ALBERT BORGMANN, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984. For an extended treatment of Borgmann's philosophy of technology and its implications for contemporary spirituality see RICHARD GAILLARDETZ, *Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Modern Life* (Revised edition), Liguori, MO, Liguori Publications, 2007.

and disburdening. If we consider such modern devices as televisions, microwave ovens, cell phones and computers, we discover technological devices that demand virtually no extended effort, no discipline, no training, no skills, and no engagement with the world around us.

Consider the difference between a piano and an iPod. Both are technological in character; both produce something that I desire, music. However, one requires extensive engagement, discipline and effort; the other provides almost unlimited and effortless access to music. What is often overlooked in the shift to the technological device is the loss of what Borgmann speaks of as the “focal” character of ordinary forms of human engagement. Focal engagement refers to modes of engagement that require a degree of attention and effort and that engage us with other persons and the broader world around us in a sustained fashion.

Within the household we are seeing the growing dominance of the device as quotidian domestic practices (e.g., meal preparation and cleanup, family conversation) are being supplanted by the ubiquity of the device. I noticed this technological shift in the ecology of the home within my own household a number of years ago. Our home had gradually ceased to be a place of gathering and instead became a space for technologically driven dispersal. With an X-Box in one room, a computer in another and a television in a third, familial interaction was gradually diminishing.

It is my hope that a reassertion of the ecclesial significance of daily household interaction may encourage a reassessment of the value of such mundane tasks as meal preparation and shared household chores within the life of the household. It is these mundane, “focal” interactions that bring richness and depth to household relations as occasions of grace and opportunities for growth in virtue.

The uniquely ecclesial character of the household may become clearer by contrasting it with other ecclesial institutions like the parish which lay claim to a relatively limited part of our lives. Our

participation in parish life, for example, is much more occasional and intentional in character. The active Catholic may participate in parish activities, for example, maybe two to four hours a week. So the occasional character of parish interaction can actually limit its influence. It is too easy to compartmentalize parish activities as “church activities” which are frequently quite distinct from the rest of life. In contrast, it is the quotidian character of life in the domestic church that renders it so ecclesially significant.

III. THE DOMESTIC CHURCH AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Let us turn now to a consideration of the relationship between the domestic church and the universal church. My extended reflections on the domestic church conceived as a household community sharing a common domicile provide the necessary background for considering how the domestic church relates to the universal church. Here I can only make two brief connections: first, I contend that the domestic church is a privileged place where baptized Christians exercise their *sensus fidei*, and second that the domestic church is a primary institution in and through which baptized Christians participate in the social mission of the church.

1. The Domestic Church and the *Sensus Fidei*

In *Lumen Gentium* the council articulated one of its most central insights into a theology of baptism when it wrote of the *sensus fidei*, the supernatural instinct for the faith that is given to believers in baptism (LG 12). This God-given instinct allows the baptized to receive God’s Word, to penetrate its meaning and significance more deeply and to apply it more profoundly in their lives. This seminal concept belongs to a lamentably large group of core conciliar insights (such as the hierarchy of truths, the priesthood of the baptized and the role of baptismal charisms) that have been almost completely marginalized in the post-conciliar church by ecclesiastical politics: some in the Catholic left have appealed to it uncritically as a principle for greater democratization of the church while many on the

right see it as little more than an act of servile obedience to the teaching office of the church. Neither view does justice to the theological richness of this teaching.

The council's teaching on the *sensus fidei* presupposes, first of all, a theology of revelation in which God's Word is given to the entire people of God in communion with their pastors. The sense of faith then is the Spirit-assisted gift by which God's People receive that Word, make it their own, and hand it on to future generations enriched by their own experience, contemplation and insight. But where is this gift operative? I suggest that a primary location for the exercise of the *sensus fidei* is not in the parish pew, nor even in the theology classroom but in the Christian household where the Word of God is realized in our most ordinary human relations and practices. Again, it is the very quotidian character of the life of the household, with its daily call to numerous minute conversions to gospel living and with its daily opportunities for witnessing the simple blessings of human interaction that makes it a privileged locus for receiving God's Word, penetrating its most profound meanings and applying it to the practices of daily Christian living.

For this reason, the failure to take seriously the gospel wisdom born of the Christian household inevitably leads to the impoverishment of the universal church. For in ignoring the unique wisdom and witness that emanates from the life of the Christian household, the church loses a vital access to the voice of the Spirit speaking to the church today.

Again, Wendy Wright provides a practical example of this. She describes the experience of having her infant's baptism celebrated in the context of the Sunday Eucharist. She eloquently describes how powerful it was to see the entire Eucharistic community participate in welcoming her child into the life of the church. However, a few weeks later she returned to mass with her infant. The child began to fuss right before the homily and the priest pointedly singled her out and asked her to take the baby out of the church. She wrote later that she wondered if the priest understood what had happened at that

baptism a few weeks earlier. As parents know all too well, to welcome a child into one's home is to allow oneself to be influenced by the child. Welcoming means accommodating oneself to the presence, demands and expectations of the one being welcomed. In a similar way, a parish's welcome of an infant will inevitably entail the acceptance of impositions, great and small, and any a number of inconveniences. Wright's insight, born of her experience of family as domestic church, offered practical wisdom regarding the nature of ecclesial welcoming to the larger church.

2. The Domestic Church Participates Fully in the Social Mission of the Universal Church

Finally, any theology of the domestic church must be aware of the dangers of a quasi-sectarian sense of the family as, to borrow Christopher Lasch's phrasing, "a haven in a heartless world"¹³. We must not replicate, in our ecclesiological considerations of the Christian household, the sectarian tendencies that have emerged with special vigor in the last few decades regarding some accounts of the role of the local church as a community of moral formation. Whether the household as domestic church is grounded in marriage or baptism, its ecclesial character demands that it be engaged with the larger society in Christian mission. This theme was first explored in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity in its consideration of the Christian family:

The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members and by family prayer, presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the church; if the whole family takes its part in the church's liturgical worship; if, finally, it offers active hospitality, and practices justice and other good works for the benefit of all its sisters and brothers who suffer from want. Among the various works of the family apostolate the following may be listed: adopting abandoned children, showing a loving welcome to strangers, helping with the running of schools, supporting adolescents with advice and help ... (AA 11).

¹³ CHRISTOPHER LASCH, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*, New York: Basic Books, 1977.

And again, in *Gaudium et spes* the council referred to the Christian family as “a school for a richer humanity” (# 52). As an ecclesial reality, the Christian household exists in mission and moves outward to a critical yet dialogical engagement with modern society. Contemporary American theologians like James and Kathleen McGinnis, Julie Hanlon Rubio and Florence Caffrey Bourg are to be applauded for the way in which they have emphasized the Christian household’s share in the social mission of the church¹⁴. Rubio has offered particularly helpful reflections on the importance of Christian parents not reducing their paid labor to a necessary source of family income. Rather, Rubio insists, the labor of parents should be presented in the light of Catholic social teaching on the dignity of human labor and presented as an expression of the family’s vocation toward the world. Rubio’s most recent work developing a family ethics also explores the household practices of hospitality, tithing and making responsible food choices as ways in which the Christian household participates in the social mission of the universal church.

CONCLUSION

In my presentation today I have offered some considerations of the ecclesial character of the Christian household by encouraging an increased emphasis on baptism as the sacramental foundation of the domestic church and on the ecclesial significance of domesticity. This emphasis on domesticity brings into the foreground the patterned practices and relations that constitute a shared household and which provide a locus for the encounter with grace, the discernment of God’s word and the exercise of Christian mission. For followers of Jesus the Christian household is not a haven in a heartless world, but a school of discipleship, a school for Christian mission and a school for a greater humanity.

¹⁴ JULIE HANLON RUBIO, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2010; BOURG, *Where Two or Three are Gathered*.

3342 Indian Rd.
Toledo, OH 43606

Richard R. Gaillardetz, Ph.D.
Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies