

The four pillars of family life

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From the time of Abraham and Moses through the Apostles to the present, God's plan for the redemption of the world has involved a partnership with His creation — human persons. God meets His beloved people and draws them near to Him through other people who already know Him. In every age, and especially in the Christian era, this dynamism involves the family. In the Sacrament of Marriage, God enters into a partnership with parents to make known the Good News of His love and to nurture the life of grace in young souls. Recognizing the truth of this reality, Blessed John Paul II often referred to the family as “the domestic church.” As Catholics we need to recognize this central aspect of family life and to cultivate ways to live it out. I would like to suggest to you four pillars upon which we can build the domestic church.

The first pillar is a supernatural outlook that husband and wife must continually strengthen. This begins with an understanding that in all efforts to be good and loving families are dependent on God's grace. The Psalmist tells us that “unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do the builders labor” (Psalms:127). Parents share in a special way in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ; their personal sanctity, intercessory prayer and sacrifices imbue family life with God's grace and protect it from evil. In a practical sense, a supernatural outlook necessitates that each spouse individually place him or herself completely in God's hands every day through fervent prayer, reliance on Him in labors and trials and the giving of self for their spouse and children. Couples should frequently pray together, placing the needs of the family with deepened trust into God's loving care.

The second pillar follows and depends upon the first: couples need to love each other with a selfless Christ-like love. If children in their earliest days see their fathers putting their mothers ahead of themselves and loving them as Christ loves the Church (see Ephesians 5), and their mothers returning the same love, they will experience the love of God even before they can understand the words of the Gospel. When they eventually hear the teachings and stories of Christ, they will already know Him in their mother and father.

It is an amazing and beautiful aspect of God's providence that the love of husband and wife is the most effective way to preach the Gospel to children, but it is also a tremendous responsibility that can fill parents with awe and trepidation. It is important to remember that God never gives a mission without the corresponding grace to achieve it. He does not call a husband and wife to this love without entering into their marriage and helping them live it out. Husbands and wives should never be discouraged by their failures to live up to

the great love to which God calls them, but should always honestly acknowledge their weakness before God and their spouse, confident in their mutual forgiveness and assistance. In the end, it is not as important that parents live this love out perfectly as it is that they persevere in their efforts to love as Christ loves on a daily basis and bear patiently and mercifully with one another's shortcomings.

Family prayer is the third pillar of the domestic church. Along with prayer before meals and Sunday Mass, every Catholic family should have weekly and daily moments when they pray together. Family prayer has an amazing power to knit a family closer together in love and to heal wounds that can and do exist in relationships. Whenever a family prays together, they allow God and His angels and saints to come into their home and warm it with Divine Love. This is not hyperbole or figurative language. The people of heaven are real and take deep affectionate interest in our lives; they are very close to us when we pray.

There are numerous times when families may pray. Morning offerings and bedtime prayers should be a part of daily life in every family since they book end our day with moments of grace and dispose the family to live in the light of God's love. Time-honored traditions such as praying the Rosary, inviting Mary and Joseph to be part of the family's life and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus all lead to a greater environment of forgiveness and loving care in the family. Reading aloud and discussing Holy Scripture and spiritual books and articles, such as on the lives of the saints, bear much fruit. There are many other ways to pray as a family. It is good to discuss these with other couples and ask your parish priest for advice on how to make it more a part of your family's life.

The fourth pillar consists in the intention and effort to form a Catholic culture in the home. This involves animating the daily work and recreational life of the family with the faith. Obviously a large part of this is the responsibility of parents to catechize their children, but it goes beyond the conveyance of the content of the faith in lessons and teaching to creating an overall atmosphere that protects and nurtures a Catholic spirit. Parents should not only keep harmful things out of the house, but also should make available religious entertainment, literature and art so as to embrace the good things of the world and engage them in an ordered way. In a particular way, parents should be conscious of making sure there is good religious art in the home. A Crucifix and image of Mary are often placed in the bedrooms of a Catholic home.

We often think about the deterioration of society and wonder how things can be turned around. Within our Church family, we hear the call for a New Evangelization of an increasingly secular society and we both pray and reflect on how to bring to fruition this essential conversion of hearts. There is certainly no one single effort that will cause this intrinsic and radical change of heart, but certainly one of the most important tasks is the rejuvenation of the family. If all Catholic families truly became domestic churches lived and

spread the Gospel of Life and Love, we will truly see dramatic changes within society and the world.