

The Family: The Church in Miniature

Authored by Joseph C. Atkinson in Issue #2.3 of *The Catechetical Review*

John Paul II was convinced that the wellbeing of both society and the Church depends on the health and strength of the family. Anticipating the coming crisis, he wrote, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.”^[i] By 1981, John Paul II could see that “the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it.”^[ii] Thirty-five years later, the attacks on the family have dramatically intensified to the point where its nature (the complimentary unity of man and woman) and its purpose (indissoluble union and procreativity) have been fundamentally rejected in the West and a false vision of reality substituted for God’s created order. We are slowly awakening to the truth that, as a society, we have truly lost the Judeo-Christian vision of what a family is. This rejection of God’s truth about the family has been costly: familial life is deeply fractured and people are profoundly wounded. The good news is that God desires to heal us. For this to take place, it is critical that we address five key needs.

First Need:

to rediscover the *biblical vision* of marriage and family

In our present cultural crisis, it is helpful to remember Proverbs 29:18, which the King James Version translates as “where there is no vision, the people perish” (literally: “let loose”). To have a “vision” is to have a road map that shows us where we are going, what our goal is, and how to get there. When we have rejected the way God has shown us, and no longer know where we are going, then our way becomes confused and our society begins to die. In contrast, God’s Word reveals the truth about the interior nature and meaning of the family; and by listening to this Word, we can begin to experience God’s healing grace. A key part to the healing of our world is the recovery of this biblical vision of the family.



Second Need:

to know that the family is a little church with the same *mission* as the Church universal

In a society that purports to have the power to define and change human nature itself, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to grasp that there is a *given* structure to reality. The liberating truth

is that we are created beings, that our nature is a gift given to us by God, and that all marriages and families are “interiorly ordained to fulfillment in Christ.”[iii]

Scripture reveals God’s purpose for marriage and family. It reveals the family as playing not only a primary role in history but also being integral to the process of salvation. That is, the family is not only the primary cell (the building block) of society but, surprisingly, it is also the primary cell of the Church. During the debates at Vatican II, Bishop Fiordelli of Prato, Italy stated that the final division of the Church was not the parish, but the family.[iv] Why? Because the family—through the baptism of its members—participates in the very life and mission of the Church, and it is a concrete expression of the Church.[v]

The family is, in reality, the Church in the home, or as Augustine said, the *domestic church*. [vi] That is, the life, nature, and mission of the Church universal is contained in microcosm in the family. (Conversely, the family also participates in and reflects the nature of the universal Church.) As we shall see, the family was so important in the Old Testament that the family became the *carrier of the covenant*. Without the family, the covenant could not exist. In the New Testament, it is because of our baptism into Christ that the Holy Spirit is actually present in the home— analogous to the Presence of God in the Temple. Now, because Christ lives in them (2 Cor 13:5), a husband and wife become icons of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32); while the family, whose members are baptized into Christ, becomes a privileged place where the Holy Spirit is especially active bringing about the salvation and sanctification of its members (1 Cor 7:10ff).

Consequently, the strength and health of society and the Church are based on the vitality of the family. Our need is to recover the true identity and mission of the family so we can “become what we are.”[vii] We need to know and to live out the truth that the family is not primarily a sociological unit but an ecclesial reality.

Third Need:

to see families as the primary place where the faith is passed on

The family plays an astonishing role in the Old Testament. As God works through history to bring about salvation, it always has a familial structure. That is, salvation—while always personal—is never an isolated, individualistic event but always has a corporate familial nature.

When God saves the world from the flood waters, he chooses Noah because he was a righteous man. As a result, Noah *and his family*, were saved (Gn 6:18). When God establishes the salvific covenant with Abraham, it is Abraham *and his family* that receive the blessing (Gen 17:7). He is the beginning point of salvation and the blessing passes through Abraham *and his family* alone. Then, through this one man, *all the families (mispethoth—note: not individuals)* of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3). When God delivers the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, the meal of salvation (the Passover) is a *family meal* and one had to be within *the home* marked with blood to be saved (Ex 12:21-23).



The very fabric of the Old Testament covenantal family life was woven through with this salvific mission. The family played an active and critical role in the passing on of the covenant from generation to generation. The three major rituals (without which Israel could not exist) are all family-based. That is, they take place in the home and are father-led rituals. The Israelites were commanded by God: first, to circumcise their sons to prevent them from being excluded from the covenant (Gen 17); second, to observe Passover in the home during which the events of salvation (the Exodus) were retold (Ex 12); and third, to redeem their first-born sons with a sacrifice in memory of the Exodus which required the death of Egypt's first born (Ex 13).

The importance of the family is clearly seen in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20). Remember, these are the essential truths that every society needs to affirm if they are to survive, many of which are concerned with the family. The Israelites are commanded to honor their fathers and mothers, which is connected to the promise of long life (v. 12). The Sabbath is a day in which the father and mother order their home towards worship on a weekly basis, which memorialized the two great acts of God: creation and the Exodus (v. 8-11). Finally, the commandments are concerned about the purity of the home so that sin cannot destroy it—either in terms of sexual immorality or adultery (v. 14) or jealousy (v. 17). Also, many of the other 603 laws in the Old Testament focus on the family to ensure its survival and wellbeing, including laws about marriage, about what could be eaten in the home, sexual activity, purity of the husband and wife, education of the faith in the home, etc.

One can only conclude that without the family and the practices that the Lord commanded, the faith would not have been passed on and there would have been no covenant. Gen 18:18 states that the Lord chose (lit. *knew*) Abraham so that he would command his children and his household and they were to keep the way of the Lord (Gen 18:19). In the Old Testament the family was the *carrier of the covenant*.^[viii]

Fourth Need:

to see the ecclesial nature of families, as places where we encounter God in each other

In the New Testament, the purpose of the family of Abraham—which alone had received the promised blessing of salvation—is fulfilled when the Holy Spirit is given (see Gal 3:14). The covenantal family is transformed at its core as the Holy Spirit begins to live in its members. The family is now ordered to and participates in something greater than itself, in the Church, the Body of Christ.^[ix] In Christ, not only does the family carry the *promise* of the covenant but God is

actually present through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The promise is *realized*. The Christian family now becomes a privileged place where the Holy Spirit is bringing people to salvation and helping them grow in holiness. This is clearly seen in 1 Corinthians 7: 12-14 where Paul shows that if one spouse is a Christian (because the Holy Spirit resides in him), the other pagan spouse is being made holy and the children are holy because of the one-flesh union of marriage. The Holy Spirit *in one spouse* affects them *all*. Thus, each family now becomes a sphere where all the members are encountering God and where the Holy Spirit is drawing all ever deeper into the love and communion of Christ and the Father.

Fifth Need:

to recognize the sacred order and God-ordained roles in the family to help all know and follow God

Both Augustine and Chrysostom well understood this active power of the Holy Spirit transforming the Christian family and saw that the family possessed an *ecclesial* nature. Chrysostom, like Augustine, called the family the little church (*micra ekklesia*) or the domestic church (*domestic ecclesia*).

If this is true, if the nature of the family is truly ecclesial, then the mission and the structures of the Church have to be found, in an appropriate form, in the family. This is what the Church Fathers posited. For example, Augustine saw that the father—as acting in a bishop-like role—protects his family from heresy with the need to exhort his family and explain the Scriptures to them.[x] Chrysostom urged that Christian families have two tables/altars (*mensa*) in their home, one for food and one for the Word of God.[xi] He emphasized the need to be thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures as a protection against evil.[xii] For both Fathers, there was a sacred order (hier-archy) in the family. This ordering within the family, as Chrysostom showed, was for the purpose of peace.[xiii]

Pastoral Application

While more can be said about the family,[xiv] the above outline identifies key areas that are essential if we are to restore the family to its God-given purpose. Let us now look at ways to address the five identified great needs.

1. The first need, as stated above, is *to help people recover the Biblical vision of the family*. As we listen to the Word of God concerning the family, we find that God's revelation is in fact *healing*. We live in a fallen world; we all are in need of Christ's healing grace. Concretely, this means that we have to help people in parishes encounter the teaching of Scripture on the structure, meaning, and purpose of the family through a consistent, long-term effort. This educative *foundation* is critical; and, without it, all the other psychological or sociological work (good as it may be) cannot bring about the lasting fruit that is desired.
2. The second need is to recognize that *the family participates in the mission of the Church universal*. Christians need to be awakened to the true dignity and vocation of the family. This

mission of the family, this form of co-operation with the Church, is not superimposed upon a family but proceeds from the very nature of the family. Helping people discover this mission is both novel and exciting. For many it will be the first time they will clearly see a purpose to their family or that their family has a mission.

3. The third need is to see that *the family plays an indispensable role in passing on the faith*. While many other means are helpful (e.g., catechesis in parish and school), we have to recognize the primacy of the family in this task. This means that, as parishes, we must make the radical decision to prepare fathers and mothers to form their children in the faith. This means providing the option of a family-based catechesis. This can surely be supplemented by other means, but these means can never be allowed to take the place of the centrality of the home. Once truly convinced that parents are the primary catechists, formation in the faith will be revolutionized.

4. The fourth great need is to see our families as *places where we encounter God with and through each other*. This can be difficult. We live in a fallen world and we ourselves are broken to various degrees. If the family is a church, then Jesus is present. Through baptism, he is present in each member of the family. We must learn the ability of becoming transparent to each other (see 1 John 1:5ff). We can learn to walk with each other, to carry each other's burdens at times, to listen, to forgive, and to love. Mysteriously, it can be in the deepest pains and wounds that we will learn to both give and receive the very love of Christ to each other. This entails accepting the uniqueness of our own family. The good news is that no problem is beyond the grace of Christ.

A family is all one flesh (see Gen 2:24) and the New Testament shows that Christ in the members of a family profoundly affects all the other members (see 1 Cor 7:12 ff.). Our fight here is against the tendencies towards isolation and individualism that permeate our culture. To counter this, we must begin to nurture a culture of love within our homes. Parishes can assist this process by encouraging families to spend time with each other, to pray for each other, to see themselves as a small community practically working out their salvation in Christ.

5. The fifth great need is to recognize that there is *an order (in fact, a sacred order) to family life*. Fathers and mothers are responsible before God to bring up their children in the faith. This encompasses the whole structure of family life. Are our families ordered to God's holiness? Joshua, at a critical point, made a decision for his family: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh 24:15). That meant that his family would orient the way they lived so it reflected the holiness of God. In our era, this issue is fundamental. The atmosphere of the home can today be dominated by negative influences, often made present through the internet and television. How do we evaluate whether or not these influences help or hinder our growth in holiness? Above all, families today must be encouraged to make a decision, to make their home a vibrant place that is ordered to life, love, and the holiness of God. Our joy comes in knowing that God gives the strength for such a decision.

Restoring the family is going to take consistent, long-term and co-coordinated efforts. We can be of good cheer because the idea of the family originally comes from God. He created the family and has bequeathed to us his vision for it. Our job is to discover more deeply God's plan for the family and to be open to it and to Christ's healing grace.

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Notes

[i] John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, art. 86.

[ii] *Ibid.*, art. 3.

[iii] *Ibid.* "Willed by God in the very act of creation, marriage and the family are interiorly ordained to fulfillment in Christ and have need of His graces in order to be healed from the wounds of sin and restored to their 'beginning,' that is, to full understanding and the full realization of God's plan."

[iv] *Acta Synodalia*, vol. 1, pars. 4, 309. See Joseph Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2014), 301-315 for a critical examination of the debates at Vatican II on these topics.

[v] John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, art. 50: "The Christian family is called upon to take part actively and responsibly in the mission of the church in a way that is original and specific."

[vi] *De Bono Viduitatis* 29 (PL 40:450) See Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family*, 271-282 for Augustine's development of the term.

[vii] John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, art. 17.

[viii] See Joseph Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2014), 91-128, which deals with the family as the carrier of the covenant.

[ix] In a passage that is both rich and somewhat dense, John Paul II calls the family a Bride of Christ: "The family itself is the great mystery of God. As the 'domestic church,' it is the *bride of Christ*. The universal Church, and every particular Church in her, is most immediately revealed as the bride of Christ in the "domestic church" and in its experience of love" (*Letter to Families* art. 19).

[x] Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium*, Tr. 51, 13 (PL 35:1768).

[xi] John Chrysostom, *In Genesim, Sermo 7* (PG 54:607).

[xii] See Chrysostom, *Homily 10*.

[xiii] See Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium*, Tr. 51, 13 (PL 35:1768) and Chrysostom, *Homilies on Titus, Homily 4*.

[xiv] Joseph Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* is a critical resource book for those interested in trying to recover the meaning and structure of the family in the modern world.=

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