



# The Christian Family and the Evangelization of Children

*By Capuchin Franciscan Father Thomas G. Weinandy, Executive Director  
Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices, USCCB*

## The Holy Family and Our Families

A number of years ago I was visiting a medieval monastery in France. In that monastery, there is a large statue carved from an ancient tree trunk. The statue depicts Joseph sitting, and on his lap is the young boy Jesus, who is about eight years old. With his muscular arms outstretched around Jesus, Joseph is holding an unfurled scroll in front of them. Together, with mouths very wide open, they are singing the psalms. It is a very moving portrayal of Jesus and the paternal care and love of his foster father, Joseph. What struck me was that this depiction illustrates one of the ways that the young boy Jesus came to know that he was truly God's Son. By singing the psalms with his earthly father, Jesus came to know the love of his heavenly Father and thus came to realize, in a human manner, that he was the eternal Son of the Father.

It was in the home of Mary and Joseph that Jesus learned to read the Sacred Scriptures and to ponder with them their deepest meaning—the meaning that he himself would ultimately

fulfill. Together with them, he would gather to celebrate the weekly Sabbath with their kinfolk and neighbors and make the yearly joyful pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. In such settings, familial and communal, Mary and Joseph fostered, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the devout life of Jesus as a Jewish man. Through his obedience to Joseph and Mary, "Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man" (Lk 2:52).

The same dynamic that existed within the Holy Family is intended to exist within our own families even now. Fathers and mothers are to teach their children to live after the manner of the Gospel and so come to know the salvation of Jesus, the love of the Father, and the new life in the Holy Spirit. How are Christian parents to do this? They are to follow the example of Joseph and Mary.

## The Catholic Family as a Domestic Church

The Holy Family foreshadowed and anticipated what the Second Vatican Council calls "the domestic church" (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic

Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium], in Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents [new rev. ed.], ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996], no. 11). Each Christian family, exemplified in the Holy Family, is to be a microcosm of the larger Church. As the larger Church is a communion of persons, so the family is a small communion of persons. The family receives its life from the larger Body of Christ, the Church, and so comes to mirror the life of this larger Church. Pope John Paul II stated in his apostolic exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason . . . it can and should be called ‘the domestic Church’” (no. 21 [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982]). The Church is a communion of faith, hope, and love. The Christian family, as the domestic Church, is equally to be a communion of faith, hope, and love. Through faith, hope, and love, Jesus abides within the family, and through the Holy Spirit he pours out the love of the Father within the family. It is within this context of the family as the domestic Church that fathers and mothers, after the manner of Joseph and Mary, have a particular obligation to nurture the Christian life within their own families.

As Joseph and Mary were the first to proclaim to Jesus the living faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so Christian fathers and mothers are the first to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their children. They not only present their child for Baptism, but

they also promise within the Rite of Baptism to raise their child in accordance with the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. The Second Vatican Council states that parents, “By their word and example . . . are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children” (Lumen Gentium, no. 11). Thus, as the Church is to evangelize all nations, so Christian parents, in fostering the domestic Church within their own families, are to evangelize their children. They do this in a number of ways, always in keeping with the age of their children.

### **Teaching the Faith**

Fathers and mothers have the primary responsibility for teaching their children the Catholic faith, even from their earliest years. Although others, such as priests and catechists, may contribute to this education, God has commissioned parents, precisely because they are fathers and mothers, to be principally accountable for the faith of the children whom they have begotten in love.

Evangelization can simply begin with teaching young children the Sign of the Cross, because all of what they will learn later centers on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For example, parents can teach their children that God the Father is the maker of all things—trees, animals, and the stars. In learning this, children not only become secure in the love of their parents, but they also become secure in someone (the Father) whom their parents profess is even greater, more powerful, and more loving than they are. Moreover, parents can teach their children about the mighty works of God in the Old Testament, especially

the story of the Exodus. Similarly, fathers can tell their sons the stories of the great boys and men in the Old Testament—Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, and Tobias. Mothers can tell their daughters of the faithful and heroic girls and women of the Old Testament—Deborah, Ruth, Esther, Judith, and the valiant mother and her seven sons in the Second Book of Maccabees who were martyred for their faith. In all these stories, children learn who God is and how they are to live virtuous and noble lives.

Young children should also learn who Jesus is—that he is the eternal Son of the Father who became man. The Gospels are replete with stories from Jesus' life, from his birth to his Ascension, that will touch the hearts and catch the imagination of children—his healings and miracles, his love for sinners and the poor, his care for children. Children can be led to faith in Jesus as the one who forgives their wrongs, watches over them with care, and promises them fullness of happiness and joy in heaven. As they mature, children can advance in an understanding of Jesus' Crucifixion and death, the importance of his Resurrection, and the hope of his coming in glory at the end of time.

Children can also learn of all the works of the Holy Spirit—that he transforms them into the likeness of Jesus and so makes them children of the Father. He is the one who makes them holy and good, because he dwells within them, making them temples of the Holy Spirit. Older children can learn that the Holy Spirit is the source of all virtue. Cooperating together, with the help of the Holy Spirit, mothers and fathers foster

virtue within each of their children—charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal 5:22-23).

### **Teaching Children to Pray**

Although teaching children the faith of the Church is essential, faith is not complete without prayer, because it is through prayer that children form a personal relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As little children learn to pray to the Father, even learning the Our Father, they experience the Father's love for them. Likewise, as children grow and mature, they are called to make their own personal act of faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. However, they can only do so if their relationship with Jesus has been nurtured in prayer during the course of their youth. Moreover, children are to learn to pray to the Holy Spirit for wisdom, guidance, holiness, and knowledge and for the power to overcome evil and to do what is right, good, and just.

It is likewise within the context of prayer that children can learn to call upon Mary and all the angels and saints for help and protection. Children can foster special devotion to certain saints, such as their own patron saint or men and women saints to whom they are particularly attracted. Of course, this implies that parents teach them the lives of the saints and point out their specific saintly qualities. The angels can also be invoked, especially their guardian angel.

What is equally important as teaching children to pray is for parents to pray with their children. It is in praying

together the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be, the Rosary, the Memorare, the Act of Contrition, and other prayers that children realize that their own prayer is not simply something that children do, but that it is also a “grown-up” thing to do. It is particularly important that boys and girls witness and participate not only in the prayer of their mother but also in the prayer of their father.

### **The Family and the Eucharist**

Catholic fathers and mothers should ensure that they and their children are immersed in the life of the Church—particularly their parish. In so doing, parents will be instrumental in teaching their children to love the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Parents can help their young children examine their consciences and, especially during Advent and Lent, go as a family to their parish to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Above all, because it is Christ’s presence within the family that truly makes it a domestic Church, their participation in the Eucharist, especially the Sunday Eucharist, is particularly important. In the Eucharist, parents and children join themselves to the one sacrifice of Jesus offered to the Father. Moreover, in receiving Jesus in Communion, the members of the family are most fully united to him and to one another.

Parents teach their children to live out the Eucharist by fostering a love and care for those around them—to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. In so doing, parents, following the example of Joseph and Mary, are teaching their children to lay down their lives out of love for their heavenly Father and for the salvation of all.

---

Copyright © 2010, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.  
Permission is hereby granted to duplicate this work without adaptation for non-commercial use.

Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC 20017 and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* edited by Austin Flannery, OP, copyright © 1975, Costello Publishing Company, Inc., Northport, NY, are used with permission of the publisher, all rights reserved. No part of these excerpts may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without express written permission of Costello Publishing Company.

Excerpts from Pope John Paul II, *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, copyright © 1982, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV). Used with permission. All rights reserved.