

**Editor's Note:** The following is an edited transcript of a lecture delivered at the 2018 CFN "[Weapons of Our Warfare](#)" Conference (Part 1 available [here](#)), the focus of which is the dignity and sanctity of marriage and family life. Audio CDs of the full lecture are available for purchase from CFN.

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## The Family as the Domestic Church

This idea – this *reality* – of the family as “domestic church” is perhaps an unfamiliar concept to some, or even a bit concerning. *Isn't “domestic church” a Vatican II term or Novus Ordo lingo*, you might be wondering? It is true, the term “domestic church” appears in [Lumen Gentium](#) (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). Article 11 of that document includes the following text:

“From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. *The family is, so to speak, the domestic church.* In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care any religious vocation.”[\[1\]](#) (Emphasis added)

While the term “domestic church” does appear in the Council, it did not *originate* with the Council. For some inexplicable reason, *Lumen Gentium* failed to cite the Scriptural and Patristic basis for the venerable term.[\[2\]](#) Thankfully for us, however, Fr. Michael Goldade of the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), covered those bases beautifully in a lecture he gave a few years ago at the annual Conference for Catholic Tradition hosted by Angelus Press. In 2015, the theme of the conference was “[The Family: Hope of the Church](#)” and Fr. Goldade spoke on “[The Family as the Domestic Church](#)”. While explaining the term “domestic church,” Fr. Goldade not only alludes to the same Scripture verses referenced in the Roman Catechism, he also provides quotations from the writings of St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine of Hippo to illustrate the proper meaning of “domestic church.” I will now do the same for you.

**St. John Chrysostom** (d. 407), who served for a time as Patriarch of Constantinople and is venerated as one of the Three Holy Hierarchs by our Eastern Catholic brethren, wrote the following in his [Homily 20 on Ephesians](#), in which he provides commentary on Ephesians 5

("Wives, be subject to your husbands...Husbands, love your wives"):

"Seek the things which are of God, and those which are of man will follow readily enough. Govern your wife, and thus will the whole house be in harmony. Hear what Paul says. 'And if they [wives] would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home' [1 Cor. 14:35]. If we thus regulate our own houses, we shall be also fit for the management of the Church. *For indeed a house is a little Church. Thus, it is possible for us, by becoming good husbands and wives, to surpass all others.*"[\[3\]](#) (Emphasis added)

This idea of managing a household as being analogous to overseeing the Church is *explicit* in the writings of St. Paul - in the *same* chapter of the *same* Epistle, no less, in which the Apostle refers to the Church as "the house [i.e. family] of God." He says in 1 Timothy 3:1-5:

"A faithful saying: if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. It behoveth therefore a bishop to be blameless, the husband of one wife, sober, prudent, of good behavior, chaste, given to hospitality, a teacher, not given to wine, no striker but modest, not quarrelsome, not covetous: but one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all chastity. But if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?"

St. John Chrysostom also describes the "domestic church" in his [Second Sermon on Genesis](#), in which we find the following instruction:

"...when you go home from here [i.e. the Divine Liturgy, or Holy Mass, in Roman Rite terms], lay out with your meal a spiritual meal, as well. The father of the family might repeat something of what was said here [note the role of the father as *teacher*]; his wife could then hear it, the children too could learn something, and even the servants might be instructed. *In short, the household might become a church*, so that the devil is driven off and that evil spirit, the enemy of our salvation, takes to flight; the grace of the Holy Spirit would rest there instead, and all peace and harmony would surround the inhabitants." [\[4\]](#) (Emphasis added)

**St. Augustine** (d. 430), perhaps the most famous Catholic convert after St. Paul, who served for many years as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, likewise emphasized the father's spiritual headship of his family. Fr. Goldade explains in his lecture: "As another comparison used by the Fathers of the Church – the father of the family as 'priest' – St. Augustine, in his *Sermon 94* [sometimes numbered as [Sermon 44](#)], even describes Catholic heads of households as having an *episcopal* function similar to his own." Here is what St. Augustine wrote:

"Discharge our office in your own houses. A bishop is called from hence, because he superintends, because he takes care and attends to others. *To every man, then, if he is the head of his own house, ought the office of the Episcopate to belong, to take care how his household believe, that none of them fall into heresy, neither wife, nor son, nor daughter...* Do not neglect, then, the least of those belonging to you; *look after the salvation of all your household with all vigilance.*"[\[5\]](#) (Emphasis added)

*Powerful words!* Words that every husband and father must take *very* seriously!

## Teaching, Governing, and Sanctifying in the Home

In light of Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the Roman Catechism, we have seen the vital importance of the Catholic family – again, a hierarchical society of baptized persons (father, mother, and children) – and its identity as the *ecclesia domestica* ("domestic church"). For the remainder of this talk, we are going to explore some practical ways by which the family must reclaim and live out its true identity, namely, to reflect the hierarchical structure and life of the Church in the home. As promised, we are going to look at the roles of *teaching*, *governing*, and *sanctifying* within the family.

In offering these practical insights on marriage and family life, I recognize that many of you have been married *much* longer than myself and have *much* more experience raising children. Therefore, I offer these insights in a spirit of humility, knowing I am still very much learning myself.

## Teaching

Let's begin with the role of *teaching*. Parents, as I am sure you know, are the *primary* educators of their children (*not* the State!), especially in regard to faith and morals. Scripture, Tradition, and nature itself teach us this common-sense truth. But, for the sake of

those who may listen to this talk in the future and not yet be convinced, allow me to quote from Fr. Austin Fagothey, S.J. and his outstanding work on Thomistic ethics entitled [Right and Reason](#). In the chapter concerning the family, Fr. Fagothey explains:

“The duty of caring for the child naturally devolves on the parents. The parents are the cause [i.e. the *instrumental* cause] of the child’s existence and therefore are charged with caring for its welfare. ...

As we have seen, the *primary* end of marriage is the good of the race to be achieved through the good of the children born of this particular union. It is not only the begetting but also the rearing of children. Rearing or education is taken here in the broadest sense for full physical, mental, and moral development, by which the children are fitted to face life, to pursue their last end, and to work with their fellows for the common good.”[\[6\]](#)

The Roman Catechism makes the point in these terms:

“As the law of God commands children to honor, obey, and respect their parents, so are there reciprocal duties which parents owe to their children. *Parents are obliged to bring up their children in the knowledge and practice of religion, and to give them the best rules for the regulation of their lives;* so that, instructed and trained in religion, they may serve God holily and constantly.”[\[7\]](#) (Emphasis added)

Prior to becoming editor of *Catholic Family News*, I was employed full-time in parish catechetical work, and I used to stress this truth *constantly* to parents: that they are the ones primarily responsible for teaching the Faith to their children, *not* the parish. One Scripture passage I often used to make this point is found in the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth of the five books of Moses (the *Pentateuch*), which is essentially his final address and instructions to the people of Israel before his death (given at the ripe old age of 120). Therein, Moses exhorts the whole nation, and parents in particular:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength. *And these words which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart. And thou shalt tell them to thy children, and thou shalt meditate upon them sitting in thy house,*

*and walking on thy journey, sleeping and rising. And thou shalt bind them as a sign on thy hand, and they shall be and shall move between thy eyes. And thou shalt write them in the entry, and on the doors of thy house.”* (Deut. 6:4-9)  
(Emphasis added)

Notice how Moses tells the people that they must *personally teach* their children. He does not say this role belongs exclusively, or even primarily, to the priests or civil leaders. Note, also, his emphasis that this teaching should be happening on a *daily basis* in the home, amidst the ordinary circumstances, routines, and tasks of daily life (“sitting in thy house, and walking on thy journey, sleeping and rising”).

*Family catechesis is essential.* As to the means of going about it, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, founder of the Society of Saint Pius X, offers the following advice to parents in his book [\*Open Letter to Confused Catholics\*](#):

“Read and reread as a family the Catechism of Trent, the finest, the soundest and the most complete. Organize ‘parallel catechism classes’ [based in the home, rather than the local parish] under the spiritual direction of good priests; do not be afraid of being called, like us, ‘rebels.’ Moreover, there are already numerous groups operating who would welcome your children.”[\[8\]](#)

Teaching our children basic *doctrine* (e.g. explaining the articles of the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the precepts of the Church) and basic *prayers* (e.g. Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, Apostles’ Creed) is mandatory; however, we must not stop there. It is equally important to teach them *by example* how to *live* the Christian life. Whereas doctrine primarily involves the intellect (engaging the theological virtue of faith), putting the truths of our Faith into practice involves the heart and the will (engaging hope and charity). I love the Epistle chosen by Holy Mother Church for the Feast of the Holy Family, in which St. Paul so beautifully paints a picture of holy family life:

“Put ye on therefore, as the elect of God, holy, and beloved, the bowels of mercy, benignity, humility, modesty, patience: bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if any have a complaint against another. Even as the Lord hath forgiven you, so do you also. But above all these things have charity, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ rejoice in your hearts, wherein also you are called in one body. And be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell

in you abundantly: in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God. All whatsoever you do in word or in work, do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.” (Col. 3:12-17)

Mercy, humility, modesty, patience, forgiveness, charity, peace, joy, and thanksgiving. All of these good fruits of the Holy Ghost should be evident in our homes (and when we fail to produce them, we have the Sacrament of Confession, thanks be to God).

## Governing

The role of *teaching* is closely related to that of *governing*. After all, the term *discipline* comes from the root word *disciple*, meaning “student.” All disciples of Christ, both young and old, must accept and practice discipline if they wish to grow in virtue. “My son,” says the Book of Proverbs, “reject not the correction of the Lord, and do not faint when thou art chastised by Him. For whom the Lord loveth, He chastiseth: and as a father in the son, He pleaseth Himself” (Prov. 3:11-12). St. Paul, after quoting these verses in his Epistle to the Hebrews, exhorts us: “Persevere under discipline. God dealeth with you as with His sons. For what son is there, whom the father doth not correct?” (Heb. 12:7). Our heavenly Father does not punish His children out of cruelty or uncontrollable anger, but rather out of love and for the purpose of correction. We must do the same for our children. Fathers, in particular, must strive to imitate the patience, longsuffering, and mercy of God the Father in their relationships with their children, while at the same time using “the rod of correction” (Prov. 22:15) – including a calm but firm spanking, if necessary – in order to “bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

Once again, the Roman Catechism proves itself an invaluable resource, even on the practical level of parenting. It exhorts parents to maintain the “middle path” of virtue with respect to discipline and thus avoid the opposing extremes of harshness and leniency:

“In the first place, they [parents] are not by words or actions to exercise too much harshness towards their children. This is the instruction of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians: *Fathers, he says, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.* [Col. 3:21] For there is danger that the spirit of the child may be broken, and he become abject and fearful of everything. Hence, the pastor should require parents to avoid too much severity and to choose rather to correct their children than to revenge themselves upon them.

Should a fault be committed which requires reproof and chastisement, the parent should not, on the other hand, by undue indulgence, overlook its correction. Children are often spoiled by too much lenity and indulgence on the part of their parents. The pastor, therefore, should deter from such excessive mildness by the warning example of Heli, the high priest, who, on account of over-indulgence to his sons, was visited with the heaviest chastisements. [cf. I Kings 2:12-17, 4:1-18]"[\[9\]](#)

## Sanctifying

At last, we come to the role of *sanctifying*. Sanctity, first and foremost, is the effect of *grace*, and the primary channels of grace are the seven sacraments. Here, again, we see the family's fundamental dependence upon Holy Mother Church, the guardian and dispenser of the sacraments, in order to *receive* the life of grace through Baptism and to *sustain* that divine life through the other sacraments – most especially, through frequent Confession and Holy Communion.

Nevertheless, as a skilled gardener is needed to nurture and protect the planted seed, so also are the parents vital for keeping alive the seed of grace in the souls of their children and helping it to flourish. Fr. Goldade summarizes this point quite well in his talk: “The family *receives* from the Church and *gives back* to the Church. The family finds in the Church its spirit and program of life; and the Church, which plants the seed in the souls of its individual members, must find suitable conditions for it to be nourished in the home.”

How, then, do we nourish the life of grace in our families? First and foremost, by living *faithfully* and *fervently* the sacramental life of the Church. Holy Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (weekdays, too, if possible) must be the sun around which the life of the family orbits. As Padre Pio used to say, “It would be easier for the earth to exist without the sun than without the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass!” The same is true for the spiritual life of our families.

In conjunction with Holy Mass and the sacraments, and empowered by the graces received through them, I'll quickly mention three additional means of sanctification that families (beginning with us parents) must employ: **(1) prayer** (especially the Holy Rosary and mental prayer), **(2) sacrifice** (especially fidelity to our daily duties), and **(3) true devotion to Mary**. These are the simple but powerful means that so quickly sanctified little Francisco and Jacinta Marto of Fatima. Hence, we as parents *must* teach our children the full Message of Fatima and lead them in putting it into practice (e.g. family Rosary, making reparation, Five First Saturdays, prayers for the Holy Father to consecrate Russia).



One resource I highly recommend to help adults grow in prayer, sacrifice, and true devotion to Mary is a book (originally published in 1953) called [\*Divine Intimacy\*](#) by Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D., a Carmelite priest and renowned spiritual director. The book's subtitle says it all: *Meditations on the Interior Life for Every Day of the Liturgical Year*. A friend of mine gave me a copy as a gift about a year ago and I will be forever grateful! I can't tell you the number of times that the meditation on a given day has spoken *directly* to something going on in my own life. I guarantee you will not regret using this book!

## Men of God, Arise!

I want to leave you with one final reflection and exhortation concerning the crisis in the Church and the family. As I have said several times during this talk, *the Church and the family are intimately related*: the health and vitality of one affects the health and vitality of the other. So, also, I am convinced that the crisis in the Church and the family share the same root cause, namely, a *crisis of fatherhood* (Steve Skojec of *OnePeterFive* wrote an outstanding article on this subject a couple of years ago entitled "[The Fatherhood Crisis: At Home and in the Church](#)"). Cardinal Mario Luigi Ciappi, the personal theologian of every Pope from John XXIII to John Paul II, famously revealed, "In the Third Secret it is foretold, among other things, that the great apostasy in the Church will begin at the top." The apostasy in the Church began at the top, and the same is true of the family. What, then, is the remedy? A restoration of strong, faithful, Catholic fatherhood in the Church and the family!

In the fall of 2011, when my daughter (oldest child) was just over a year old, my wife and I went to see a powerful film called [Courageous](#).<sup>[10]</sup> The story centers on an average American family and specifically on the father, Adam, who is a sheriff's deputy. The family is rocked to the core when tragedy strikes and Adam is forced to take stock of the rather mediocre job he has been doing as a father. He seeks spiritual guidance from his pastor, starts digging into Scripture, and, as a result, he produces a written commitment for himself which he calls the Resolution. In closing, I will recite it for you:

"I DO solemnly resolve before God to take full responsibility for myself, my wife, and my children.

I WILL love them, protect them, serve them, and teach them the Word of God as the spiritual leader of my home.

I WILL be faithful to my wife, to love and honor her, and be willing to lay down my life for her as Jesus Christ did for me.



I WILL bless my children and teach them to love God with of their hearts, all of their minds, and all of their strength.

I WILL train them to honor authority and live responsibly.

I WILL confront evil, pursue justice, and love mercy.

I WILL pray for others and treat them with kindness, respect, and compassion.

I WILL work diligently to provide for the needs of my family.

I WILL forgive those who have wronged me and reconcile with those I have wronged.

I WILL learn from my mistakes, repent of my sins, and walk with integrity as a man answerable to God.

I WILL seek to honor God, be faithful to His Church, obey His Word, and do His will.

I WILL courageously work with the strength God provides to fulfill this resolution for the rest of my life and for His glory.

*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. ~ Joshua 24:15"*

Men of God, fathers who fear the Lord, it is time to arise! Through the intercession of St. Joseph – the Mainstay of families, Terror of demons, and Protector of Holy Church – let us reclaim our role and, in union with our Immaculate Mother and Queen, crush the filthy head of Satan under her mighty heel! Thank you and God bless you!

## Notes

[1] *Lumen Gentium* (21 Nov. 1964), art. 11.

[2] Indeed, the term “domestic church” has been misunderstood in recent decades and, in some instances, used subversively by Modernist forces to attack the Church’s hierarchy in favor of egalitarianism. However, the abuse of something good does not change the inherent goodness of the thing misused. The remedy for such confusion and subversion is not the condemnation of the term “domestic church” but, rather, an orthodox explanation of the term and the important *reality* it expresses.

[3] Philip Schaff (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., fifth printing—January 2012), p. 148.

[4] Robert C. Hill (trans.), *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 74 (St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 1-17) (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), p. 37.

[5] Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 6, p. 406.

[6] Fagothey, *Right and Reason*, pp. 362, 365.

[7] *Roman Catechism*, Part III (The Decalogue), Fourth Commandment, p. 418.

[8] Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, *Open Letter to Confused Catholics* (Kansas City: Angelus Press, eighth printing—Sept. 2010), p. 186.

[8] *Roman Catechism*, Part III (The Decalogue), Fourth Commandment, pp. 418-419.

[10] Note of disclaimer: While there is much that is edifying in the film *Courageous*, it is a Protestant-based movie and thus does not present Catholic theology on the nature of faith and salvation. My reference to one positive aspect of the film does not constitute a blanket endorsement of every view presented therein.