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A CATHOLIC VISION FOR FAMILY LIFE

CHRISTIAN VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

BY DR. GREGORY POPCAK

Family life has changed radically over the past few decades, and there's no denying that Catholics have been caught up in the cultural whirlwind. Our current culture isn't only unreceptive to the Church's views on marriage and family life, but it often also condemns them as oppressive, discriminatory, outdated, undesirable, and impossible to live up to. In this climate, it's important for us to ask—and answer—for ourselves and our world:

- *Can the Catholic vision of family life remain relevant in the world today?*
- *Can we hold on to a Catholic vision of family life in the midst of the cultural storm that's raging against family life as a whole?*

Prophetic Mission

The answer to these questions is a resounding yes! Catholic families must learn to assert their unique identity as prophetic witnesses and live that identity more boldly, courageously, and grace-fully than ever before! Our social context has changed, but our mission has not. God still calls all people to himself, and he uses the radical witness of the Catholic family to do it.

Even intact, faithful families are negatively affected by our cultural situation. For the most part, family life has been redefined as a collection of individuals living under the same roof and sharing a data plan. Even so-called “normal” families struggle under the weight of the cultural expectation that extracurricular activities should now provide



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the socialization and sense of meaning that family life used to impart. Parents and children of even the healthiest families are tempted to pursue activities such as work, sports, and technology over emotional and spiritual intimacy through family dinners, family time, and family prayer and worship.

Clarifying the Vision

So what is this unique, positive vision of family life the Church offers the world? In *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II presents something of a mission statement for Catholic families. Families are called to ground their lives in the pursuit of “authentic freedom, actualized in the sincere gift of self” and to cultivate, in all their interactions, “respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial openness, dialogue, generous service, solidarity and all the other values which help people to live life as a gift” (92).

Imagine the powerful impact such a family could have on each other and on those who encounter them! It’s tempting to say that these ideals are too lofty, but that would be missing the point. True, only Christ can accomplish this vision in our lives, but our pursuit of this vision is stunning enough for the world to take notice. Encountering Christians who believe in this vision of love enough to allow it to form the way they live their lives as husbands, wives, parents, and children through good times and bad, sickness and health, wealth and poverty is transformational.

Five ‘Marks’

How do Catholic families put this vision into practice? I suggest that the Catholic family must be known by following five “marks.” While this list isn’t exhaustive, these five traits will empower families to live the Catholic difference in their daily lives.

1. Worship Together: The Eucharist is the source of our love and the sign of the intimacy to which we’re called. Therefore, as a family, we attend Mass together on Sundays and holy days (and at other times as we’re able) and actively participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

As part of this participation, we recognize that we struggle to be the loving communities we’re called to be. Therefore, as a family, we regularly go to confession (recommended monthly) to seek God’s healing and grace so we might better live his vision of love in our lives and homes.

2. Pray Together:

The Church refers to the family as

“the domestic church” because family life is where the faith is supposed to

be lived out every day (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 11). Catholic families are called to love each other not only with their human love, but also with the love that flows from God’s own heart. As Catholic families, we recognize that we cannot love one another as God loves us unless we ask him—together—to teach us what this means. Therefore, in addition to individual prayer and parish liturgy, we gather as husband and wife and also as a family for prayer each day.

Praying in an honest, heartfelt manner that leads to deeper intimacy with God and each other, use these opportunities to

- Praise and thank God for his blessings.
- Ask forgiveness for the times you didn’t love God and each other as you ought.
- Ask God for the grace to love each other and the world better.
- Seek God’s will for your life.
- Pray for your needs and those of the family of God.

3. Be Open and Loving: Families are schools of love (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1657) where we learn to love God and each other with our whole hearts, minds, souls, and strength. As a family, we constantly challenge ourselves to discover new ways to be even more open with and loving to each other as husband and wife, parents and children.



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