

THE FAMILY AS THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

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By referring to the Christian family as the “domestic Church” in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church¹ and as “domestic sanctuary of the Church” in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity,² Vatican II has retrieved the apostolic and patristic notion of the family as Domestic Church. It has thus caught up a most significant intuition existing in the Church from the beginning and further developed in subsequent theological reflection. The analogy has now become almost a commonplace, not only because of its simplicity as a label for the Christian family, but also and especially because of the rich meaning it contains and the practical suggestions it evokes.³

Referring to the family as domestic Church at one of his general audiences on Wednesdays, Pope Paul VI traced the whole idea back to the words of Christ addressed to Saint Peter: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church”.⁴ The Church, instituted by Christ, is in the process of being built and will remain so until the end of time. Its task is to prolong Christ in history and to continue his saving mission throughout the whole world. This task falls upon all the baptised because of their common priesthood, and in its own special way on the Christian family endowed and sanctified by the sacrament of matrimony.

The doctrine about the common or universal priesthood becomes eminently practical when applied to the Christian spouses who have become a community of love, life and salvation. The partners in marriage and their children, having become

1. LG, n.11

2. AA, n.11.

3. See e.g. D. Tettamanzi, *La Chiesa Domestica*, Ed. Dehoniane, Napoli 1979; P. Evdokimov, “Ecclesia Domestica”, *L'Anneau d'Or*, 107 (1962) 353-362; G. Piana, “La Chiesa domestica, comunità sacerdotale, profetica e regale”, *Temi di pastorale della famiglia*, VV.AA., Torino 1973, 169-178; D. Sartore, “La famiglia chiesa domestica”, *Lateranum* 45 (1979) 2, 282-303; H.J.Klauck, “Die Hausgemeinde als Lebensform im Urchristentum”, *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 32, 1 (1981) 1-15; N. Provencher, “Vers une théologie de la famille: l'église domestique”, *Église et théologie*, 12.1 (1981) 9 -34; L. Alessio and H. Munoz, *Marriage and Family: The Domestic Church*, Society of St Paul, Staten Island, N.Y. 1982,

4. Allocation on the 11th August 1976, *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 14 (1976), pp. 638-640.

a vital cell in society, are at the same time a vital element in the community of the Church of Christ, deriving benefit from its union with the Mystical Body of Christ and, in its turn, as a Christian family, contributing to the vitality and growth of the entire people of God. The Christian family is, therefore, an organic component of the Church of Christ, endowed with its proper charisms and ministries and called for a specific announcement of the Gospel.

It is interesting to note that the word 'Church' comes from the Greek *kyriake oikia*, the family of the Lord. It is significant that when people sought a word to describe 'Church', they chose one which means 'family of the Lord'. Although there are many different and complementary ways of understanding Church, the one aspect common to them all is some dimension of union, communion, love, community, that is, of family life.

As we have already mentioned, throughout salvation history family life has always been used as the natural prime image of the deepest religious values. Idolatry and sin were described as prostitution; and when Yahweh threatens to withdraw his care and protection, he says that the result will be like the absence of the joys of married life (see Jer. 16,1-4). God's attitude to his people is described in the imagery of marriage and family (see Song of Songs and Hosea).⁵

Hence it is no wonder that the conviction that the family is the most basic religious community finds its roots also in the ancient Jewish tradition. Here it is the home, and not the synagogue, which is the centre of religious life.⁶ Similarly, the essential values of family life are also those of Church life. We read, in fact, in the New Testament how the early Christians gathered in their homes for the breaking of bread, and in fact how the household Church played a key role in St Paul's missionary efforts. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul expresses himself as follows: "The Churches in Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the Church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord."⁷ To the Romans Paul writes as follows: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the Churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the Church in their house."⁸ Hence there is sufficient evidence

5. Cf. L. Doohan, *Lay-centred Church*, Winston, Minnesota 1985, 83-85.

6. Cf. T. Veling, "Family-centred ministry", *Compass XXI*, n.3 (Spring 1987), 39.

7. 1 Cor. 16,19.

8. Rom 16, 3-5; see also Phil.2; 2 Tim. 1,16; 4,19.

that not only the entire Christian community, or even the Christian community in a particular town or city, was designated as Church, but the domestic community, that is, the Christian family.

In the writings of the Church Fathers we do as well come across expressions indicating that the Christian family was regarded as a small Church. Thus, in one of his sermons, St John Chrysostom exhorts his faithful "to turn their home into a church." Addressing the same faithful on the following day, he elaborates the same thought saying: "When yesterday I urged you to turn your home into a church, you burst into acclamations of joy and manifested in a most eloquent manner the inner happiness which was flooding your souls on hearing such words."⁹

Before we further proceed to the analysis and the proper understanding of the Christian family as domestic Church in the spirit of Vatican II, it might be worthwhile presenting a brief description of ecclesial life mapped by the Council and of the various layers, so to speak, in which the Church of Christ is actually and variously realised. In this way one will then have a better sense of the specific ecclesial situation of the Christian family.

The first ecclesial form is that of the universal Church, which is the people of God embracing all the baptised and, as Vatican II says, 'subsists' in the Catholic Church. While showing a proper appreciation of the diversity of roles and ministries in the Church, the Council sought first of all to state with absolute clarity that within the Church every Christian is important, as the fullness of the Church's life is accomplished only thanks to the generous contribution of every member.

A second form of the Church is the national Church, that is, the entire body of Christians within a particular country or nation. In this we see the recognition of the importance of cultural and regional characteristics which contribute to the richness of the universal Church. The contribution of Episcopal Conferences since Vatican II has been most beneficial not only to the regions or nations they represented, but to the Church at large.

9. St John Chrysostom, *In Genesis Sermon VI, 2; VII, 1*: PG 54, 607f. See also St Augustin, *Ep. 188,3*: PL 33, 849; *Sermo 94*: PL 38, 580-581.

The third form of ecclesial life is that of the diocese. While the diocese has long enjoyed an autonomous status as a vital element in the Church, Vatican II made it a point again to emphasise its role, as the fullness of Christ's power is made available through the person of the local bishop. The latter's leadership in overseeing and facilitating the pastoral efforts of the diocese, his role as primary celebrant of the Liturgy, his personal expression of love and solicitude, all these serve to emphasise that the Church must before all else be the continuation of Christ's presence among us.

A fourth ecclesial structure singled out by the Council is that of the local community with the parish priest as its head. The local Church is, of course, the commonest form of Church most Christians think of. What comes to the forefront here is the parish liturgy, and in a special way the celebration of the Eucharist. For most people the parish is the concrete embodiment of their sense of being Christian.

Finally the Christian family is the fifth form of authentic ecclesial community. Vatican II, as we have seen, reactivated a traditional designation of the Christian family by calling it 'Domestic Church', or the Church of the home. The importance of this move on the part of the Council cannot be overestimated. It establishes a foundation for the development of a whole theological understanding of the family as one of tremendous significance. While it may be true that the Christian family, in general, has yet to sense and appreciate its outstanding calling, there can be no doubt that a promising dogmatic foundation for a renewed theology of the Christian family has been laid.

Such a renewed and fruitful theological reflection of Christian family life can only be gained through the careful and honest examination of the human experiences inherent in that life, which will be an expression of the life of the Church which Christ has established. It will be a description of how the reality of the Christian mystery, of God's merciful and faithful love for each one of us, impregnates the utterly personal life of marriage and the family. It will describe, in terms understandable by those who live the reality, the most intimate friendship that God makes possible between humans because they are empowered to do so by his own redeeming love.

A common tendency, almost already prevalent before Vatican II, has been that of limiting religious and Christian experience to a celebration in the church building. While the latter may be miles away from the home, the site where so much of the

Christian life is being celebrated and expressed is the home where the Christian family spends most of its time.¹⁰

The concept of the Christian family understood as domestic church, already taken up by Vatican II, as we have seen, was resumed by the Popes since then. Thus Paul VI, in his renowned allocution to the *Equipes Notre-Dame* in 1970, could express himself as follows: "For the Christian spouses, the very manifestation of their tenderness is permeated with the love that they draw from the Heart of God. And if the human source of love were in danger of drying up, its divine source is inexhaustible because of the fathomless depths of God's tenderness. Hence the richness of the intimate communion toward which married love tends. It is an interior and spiritual reality that transforms the couple's community of life into what could be called, according to the authorised teaching of the Council, 'the Church of the home', a true 'cell of the Church', as our beloved predecessor John XXIII expressed to you on the occasion of your pilgrimage of May 3rd 1959. It is a basic, germinal cell, the smallest to be sure, but also the most fundamental one, in the Church organism".¹¹

One notes here that Vatican II makes use of similar terms to describe the state of marriage on the one side as "community of love and life", and on the other side the Church, People of God, which Christ has established as "a fellowship of life, charity and truth."¹²

Pope John Paul I too, during his very short ministry on the Chair of Peter, had occasion to refer to the Christian family as Domestic Church. Addressing a group of bishops from the United States in what became one of his very few public discourses, Pope Luciani spoke thus on family life: "The Christian family is so important, and its role so basic in transforming the world and in building up the kingdom of God, that the Council called it a 'Domestic Church'. Let us never grow

10. Cfr. David M. Thomas, *Family life and the Church*, Paulist Press, N.Y. 1979, 32-35.

11. *Discours aux Equipes Notre-Dame*, 4th May 1970, n.8: AAS 62, 1970, pp. 431-432; also published in the English language in *Good News for Married Love*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 1974; see p.18. The quotation from John XXIII can be found in Italian in *Discorsi, messaggi, colloqui del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII*, 1, Typis Poliglottis Vaticanis, p.298.

12. GS. n.48; LG. n.9.

tired of proclaiming the family as a community of love: conjugal life unites the couple and is procreative of new life. It mirrors divine love and, in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, is actually a sharing in the covenant of love between Christ and his Church [...] The holiness of the Christian family is indeed a most apt means of producing the serene renewal of the Church which the Council so eagerly desired. Through family prayer, the '*ecclesia domestica*' becomes an effective reality and leads to the transformation of the world. Dear brothers, we want you to know where our priorities lie. Let us do everything we can for the Christian family, so that our people may fulfil their great vocation in Christian joy and share intimately and effectively in the Church's mission - Christ's mission - of salvation."¹³

Only a few weeks after his election to the papacy, John Paul II spoke about the family in his very first pastoral visit in the city of Rome, which is his diocese. On that occasion he referred to the family as domestic Church, a title which was to remain very dear to him throughout his long pontificate. Among other things he said the following words: "To whom goes my thought at this particular time, whom am I addressing? I have in mind just now each and everyone of the families who live in this parochial community and constitute a part of the Church of Rome. In order to really visit the parishes, as part of the diocesan Church, I should really reach all the 'domestic Churches', that is, all the families of this parish [...]. Hence, while finding myself here among you, around this altar, as Bishop of Rome, I do feel spiritually present in all the families."¹⁴

One of the most frequently recurring themes at the Synod of Bishops, which had the family as its topic, held in Rome in 1980, was that of the family as Domestic Church. It appeared, in fact, in the text of the basic official document which was in the hands of the bishops during the entire course of the Synod.¹⁵

In this document an attempt is made at giving a theological explanation justifying the use of the phrase 'domestic Church' with reference to the family. It starts by

13. John Paul I, *Address to American Bishops*, 21st September 1978: AAS 70, 1987, pp. 765-767.

14. John Paul II, *Addresses at the Parish of Saint Francis Xaviour in Rome*, 3 December 1978, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 1 1978, Poliglotta Vaticana, p. 275.

15. *Instrumentum Laboris*, De muneribus familiae Christianae in mundo hodierno", in G. Caprile, *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi*, pp. 658-738; see especially n. 42, pp. 659 ff.

saying that Vatican II, by calling the family 'domestic Church', is somehow suggesting that some elements of the Church are to be found in the family itself. The family, in fact, is constituted by a call or vocation from the Father, a vocation which is made manifest by the love that arises between the man and the woman, and becomes a covenant, an extension of the covenant between Christ and his Church, in the celebration of the sacrament of holy matrimony. Being constituted as a Christian family by the sacrament of the Church, and at the same time being nourished by it, the couple become assimilated to Christ and participates in Christ's love for his Church under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The family in this very process enters into the mystery of the Church and shares in her mystery.

Accordingly the Christian family belongs to the Church in a very intimate and profound way; it is connected to it by bonds which are not merely of a social and psychological nature; God's effective word in the sacrament renders the Christian family not only a living image of the Church, but also its manifestation and in some way its off-shoot. Having been inserted in this way into the mystery of the Church, the Christian spouses and parents, endowed with the love of Christ and under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, are called to carry out in the course of time the salvific ministry of Christ and his Church. Every member of the Christian family, thanks to the gifts and ministries given to them by the Holy Spirit, can and must become witnesses and co-operators of mother Church's fecundity by the strength of the love of Christ, her Bridegroom, who loved her and gave himself up for her.

The Christian family, furthermore, participates in the life and mission of the Church according to its proper character. In as much as it is a community, it participates in the life of the Church in a communitarian way, manifesting the presence of Christ and of the Church in the world through the love of the spouses themselves, through their fruitfulness and fidelity, and also through the loving co-operation of all its members.¹⁶

Among the many interventions made by various bishops on this topic during the Synod, two are worthy of special mention. The first one is the one made by Mgr. M. Irizar Campos, of Perù, who remarked that the Christian family can only be comprehended in relation to the Church, namely in terms of a domestic Church.

16. Cfr. *Loc. Cit.*

“The Church is, first of all, the model of the Christian family. Hence we must syntonise ourselves with the Church’s doctrine regarding the family; we must also accept the family model offered to us by the Church. The Christian family can be set up evangelically and historically only with constant reference to the concrete ecclesial community. But there is more. Analogously, the family itself, in her turn, becomes a point of reference for the Church at large. If the family is truly a small community within the great community, if it is the domestic Church in the universal Church, it cannot fail being the mirror upon which the Church is reflected, its image, its sacramental realisation. Just as the Church is the foundation of the family, so also the family is the foundation upon which the Church is built.”¹⁷

The other intervention was by Cardinal J. Landazuri Ricketts, also of Perù. To a vast theology of matrimony as a sacrament there does not exist a deepened theological reflection on the family as ‘domestic Church’ in all its aspects. The family itself, in fact, should be considered as a sacramental reality.”¹⁸

Reacting to the synodal experience, several were the bishops and episcopal conferences around the world who, writing to their own folds, illustrated the most significant reflections of the Synod. In the official document of the Italian Episcopal Conference issued on the 1st October 1981, the Italian bishops had this to say about the family as domestic Church, among other things: “Inserted into the Church by the Holy Spirit by means of the sacrament of matrimony, the Christian family as such receives its own structure and interior physiognomy which makes it a living and vital cell of the Church itself. The link of the couple and of the family with the Church, besides incorporating and elevating all the social and psychological aspects which are characteristic of every human communion, presents properly speaking an aspect of grace: it is a new link, a supernatural one. The Christian family is not linked to the Church just as the human family is aggregated to the civil society; but it is united to it by an original link. A link that is provided by the Holy Spirit himself, who in the sacrament makes of the conjugal couple a Christian family, a living reflection, a true image, a historical incarnation of the Church. In this sense

17. *Ibid*, p. 413.

18. *Ibid*, p. 405.

the Christian family is present in history as an efficacious sign of the Church, that it, as a revelation which manifests and announces it, and as an actualisation which presents and incarnates in its own way its salvific mystery. The Church-family relationship is a reciprocal one, and as such it preserves and perfects itself. By announcing the word and the faith in the celebration of the sacraments, and by the service of charity, the mother Church generates, sanctifies and promotes the family of the baptised. At the same time the Church calls upon the Christian family, inviting it to participate, as an active and responsible subject, to its own salvific mission. For this reason it is justifiable to say that the couple and the Christian family are, in some way, a domestic Church, that is, a community that is saved and that saves: in fact it does not only receive the love of Jesus Christ who saves, but it announces and communicates it to others in its turn.”¹⁹

Resuming the most significant intuitions and suggestions of the Synod in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II lays special emphasis on the Christian family as Domestic Church. “Among the fundamental tasks of the Christian family”, he writes, “is its ecclesial task: the family is placed at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church. In order to understand better the foundations, the contents and the characteristics of this participation, we must examine the very profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a ‘Church in miniature’ (*Ecclesia Domestica*), in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church. It is, above all, the Church as Mother that gives birth to, educates and builds up the Christian family, by putting into effect in its regard the saving mission which she has received from the Lord. By proclaiming the word of God, the Church reveals to the Christian family its true identity, what it is and should be according to the Lord’s plan; by celebrating the sacraments, the Church enriches and strengthens the Christian family with the grace of Christ for its sanctification to the glory of the Father; by the continuous proclamation of the new commandment of love, the Church encourages and guides the Christian family to the service of love, so that it may imitate and relive the same self-giving and sacrificial love that the Lord Jesus has for the entire human race”.²⁰

19. *Comunione e comunita' nella Chiesa domestica*, CEI Document for the social year 1981-82, n. 5; in *Il Regno-Documenti*, XIX, 1981, p. 594.

So it is not only an ecclesial dimension that one must have in mind when one refers to the Christian family as domestic Church, but rather an ecclesial 'reality'. The family is ecclesial by nature, if we can use this expression when dealing with a reality which, besides being natural, is also supernatural in essence. As a vital cell of the Church, the family is a 'part' of the Church. In as much as all the Christian families put together make up the Church, there is some truth in saying that the Church originates from the family. Looking at the whole matter inversely, one can also say that the family is an extension of the Church, its prolongation and long arm, in such a way that all the characteristics of the Church as well as its manifold saving action are realised, even if partially and analogously, in it, as we can gather from the Holy Father's elaboration of the concept.

Since the Church herself is the prolongation of Christ, we are not surprised to find that Christ's triple function as prophet, priest and king are the constitutive elements of her mission. The same triple function of Christ and the Church is also to be found in the Domestic Church, as Pope John Paul II explains in his Apostolic Exhortation by presenting the Christian family as a believing and evangelising community, as a community in dialogue with God, and as a community at the service of man. "As a sharer in the life and mission of the Church, which listens to the word of God with reverence and proclaims it confidently, the Christian family fulfils its prophetic role by welcoming and announcing the word of God: it thus becomes more and more each day a believing and evangelising community."²¹

In early Christianity, as we know, the Christian family was the primordial worshipping community. One of the most striking features of the first generations of Christians was, in fact, their attitude towards worship and liturgy. They had no temples or other special places of worship, and the priests, while being scarce in number, were mostly dedicated, like the Apostles, to missionary activity. There was no special realm kept special and apart from ordinary life. The early Christians sought to make the entirety of their human existence sacred and cultic. Christian life was basically familial in structure and tone; it celebrated the simple joys of humans, such as the birth of a child, the beauty of nature, the visit of a friend within its four walls, and so it did for the celebration of sufferings, such as an illness, a bereavement, or even an injustice for the Gospel's sake.

20. *FC*, n. 49.

21. *FC*, n. 50.

With passing of time, however, the home, along with its family celebrants, its yearly cycle of feasts and unique family celebrations, became overshadowed by the Church building. This was originally meant to be a gathering point for the Christian families, and not a substitute for the domestic Church, as it has tended to become over the centuries.²²

Yet it seems that we are now experiencing in some measure the wind of change. Thanks to the liturgical renewal verified during the past fifty years or so, and especially to the Council, our attention is being drawn again to this basic religious centre, the primal domestic Church, which is the home. Once again, one is urged to look upon the home as a place of prayer and worship. "We bring forth, from the treasury of traditions, the customs, rituals, blessings and prayers to find their real beauty when celebrated in the home of the persons whose lives are directly and intimately touched by them".²³

Some very interesting and meaningful remarks relating to the Christian family as domestic Church were made by A.M. Stavropoulos, an Orthodox theologian, at an international congress held at Louvain in 1972. He believes that the 'traditional image' of the family as a 'Church in miniature' is particularly helpful to us in trying to formulate a theology of the family and even a "conjugal anthropology". When the Church encloses the human mystery of the union of man and woman within its own mystery as Church, being sacramental itself, it transforms that human mystery into the sacrament of the union of man and woman. The sacrament of marriage transfigures this union so that it conforms to the dimensions of the Church, setting on the man and the woman the task of building together their domestic 'Church in miniature', where the Holy Spirit is present and the Kingdom manifested. Their union is raised to the dignity of a symbol of the great mystery, the union between Christ and his Church. The human mystery thus becomes an ecclesial mystery; the symbolic is picked up again by the ontological."²⁴

22. Cf. Veling, *art. Cit.*, p.40.

23. E. Hays, *Prayers for the Domestic Church*, quoted by Veling, *art. Cit.*, p.40. Cfr. Also G. Piana, "La Chiesa Domestica: comunità sacerdotale, profetica e regale", *VV.AA., Temi di Pastorale della Famiglia*, Torino 1973, 169.

24. A.M.Stavropoulos, "The conception of marriage in the Orthodox Church", *Acts of the 14th International Colloquy on Sexology*, Louvain, May 26-28, 1972, pp. 1-5.

As Jack Dominican remarks, “until recently much of the life of the Church was centred on the priesthood and the hierarchy, and inevitably the unmarried state of both tended to deflect attention away from the significance of marriage. It is now increasingly realised that the fundamental unit in the Church is the family, the Domestic Church as it had come to be called. It is here, within the relationships of the family, that everyone learns the meaning of love and practises it. It is the experience of marriage itself as love which is capable of giving meaning to the other sacraments”.²⁵

In the Christian family both parents and children are in a privileged position for understanding the meaning of the various sacraments, for being prepared to receive them and obtaining greater spiritual benefit from them. One could even say, in a way, that the family’s relationship to the various sacraments is so close and intimate, that each of them is continually being celebrated spiritually within the family that is imbued by the spirit of the sacrament of holy matrimony. This consideration justifies even further the contention that the family is in reality a domestic Church. This is, in fact, the view of a number of theologians today, such as Dominican, whom we have just mentioned.²⁶

This concept is brought out rather forcefully in the liturgical rite of matrimony, where the spouses express their mutual consent: “I take you to be my wife (my husband); I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, I will love you and honour you until death do us part”. These solemn words, in fact, bear a great similarity with the words of consecration in the celebration of the Eucharist: “Take and eat: this is my body, which is given up for you”. Christ gives his body and blood, that is his entire person, to us, out of love, and for ever. And so do the bride and groom when they mutually give and take each other out of love, and for ever. They are, so to speak, consecrating themselves to each other, celebrating their own bridal eucharist together for the first time and prolonging it for the rest of their lives.

25. Jack Dominican, *Marriage, Faith and Love*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1981, 260.

26. Cfr. Dominican, *Loc. Cit.*; D. and M. Biancardi, “La famiglia”, *Il ministero della coppia cristiana*, X (1976) 58-69; Domenico Sartore, “La famiglia, chiesa domestica”, *Lateranum*, XLV/2, (1979) 282-303, esp. pp. 300-3; John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 2 Febr. 1994, Lib. Edit. Vaticana, 1994, n. 18; G. Saldarini, “Riempite d’Aqua le Anfore”, *Il Regno* 19 (1 Nov. 1991), 600-612; J. Knox, “Marriage and the Eucharist”, *Osservatore Romano* (6 Sept. 1982) 9-10.

Addressing the *Équipes Notre-Dame* on matters relating to marriage and the family, Paul VI briefly refers to the priestly aspect of the family's ministry and quotes from St Thomas Aquinas where the latter compares the Christian parents' vocation to the ministry of the priesthood: "Some propagate and conserve the spiritual life by a ministry that is only spiritual, and this belongs to the sacrament of Order. Others do it by a ministry that is both physical and spiritual; this takes place in the sacrament of Marriage, which unites man and woman so that they may have children and rear them for the worship of God."²⁷

Approaching the subject of priestly ministry on more solid theological grounds, I have found Yves Congar's treatment of this topic of very great interest. He introduces the subject by saying that "among the finest and best things of Christian life there is a priesthood of the fathers and mothers of families". This he explains by saying that there is a natural priesthood in virtue of which the head of the community is also a priest. The teaching has now prevailed in Western theology that the partners, being the ones involved in the marriage covenant, 'give themselves the sacrament', that is, they are the ministers of the sacrament, the priest being but a witness on behalf of the Christian community. The Fathers of the Church, further remarks Congar, often speak of the priesthood of the father of a family, and of his authority as a true ministry, a sort of bishopric'. "The priesthood of the Christian husband and wife", concludes Congar, "is therefore more than a simple application of the spiritual priesthood of holiness to a particular situation, as is found, for instance, in the case of a school teacher with reference to his charge. There is something 'instituted' about it, and that not only on the basis of an '*officium*', a public responsibility, but of a sacramental consecration, that of baptism being echoed in that of marriage. Marriage is a charism, says Saint Paul; it is a function in the Mystical Body and an '*ordo*', says tradition; these statements are fundamentally concordant; but they have reference to the Church considered as an organism, a body organically articulated."²⁸

A deeper look into the matter will make the reader aware that the Christian family is a domestic Church not by mere analogy, nor purely metaphorically, not even because of the pastoral and evangelical ministry it is called upon to perform, but because of its very essence. Nor should we be content by saying that the Christian

27. *Contra Gentiles*, IV, 58.

28. Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland 1965, 202-207.

family is 'part' of the Church, which it certainly is, but rather the 'Church in miniature', having within itself all the essential elements of the Church. Hence, as Karl Rahner has declared, "we are not saying that the family is 'like' the Church, or that it is 'part' of the Church. The family 'is' the Church in that it is a genuinely ecclesial expression of God's presence among specific communities of people. The family is, in fact, a 'local Church', and local Churches are not merely members of the total Church. They are actual realisations of what the Church is as a whole."²⁹

This last point is crucial to our understanding of family as authentically Church. We are inclined to think of a local Church as something sealed down, or something very big which has been divided up. Yet, as Rosemary Haughton points out, the Church is not a vast thing subdivided. On the contrary, Church is something we encounter essentially in the localised experience, and each time we encounter that experience of Church, in however small a situation, we are encountering Church in the full sense. Hence it is the Church in its totality, although not totally, that realises itself in the family, according to the latter's specific way of being.³⁰

A similar reasoning is made in theology regarding the relationship between the universal Church and the local Churches. The Christian family as such has its own ecclesial completeness, in a way that is somewhat similar to the fragment of crystal which bears within itself the complete structure of the whole, and not just a part of it. Being the vital cell of the Church, the family contains the entire Church potentially within itself, like every other living cell in respect to its proper organism, just as all the characteristics of a complete human being, we would say today, are already 'contained' in its DNA.³¹

These important reflections upon the profound similarity and essential interdependence existing between the Christian family as a Domestic Church and the Church of Christ in its universality, fit in very well, if I am not mistaken, with the old theological method based on the principle of *locus theologicus*.³² According to this method, theological conclusions about God's supernatural revelation, and in

29. Karl Rahner, *Studies in Modern Theology*, Herder, London 1965, 293-294.

30. R. Haughton, *New Heart for a New World*, Sydney 1986, 138-139.

31. Cfr. P. Adnes, "Mariage et vie chretienne", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite*, Beauchesne, Paris, X, 1980, cc. 355-388; see also G. Volta, "La famiglia comunità di Chiesa", *Rivista Diocesana di Mantova*, 54 (1973), 230 ff.

our case about the life of the Church as Christ wanted it to be, can be acquired not only from Holy Scripture and Tradition, but also, although in a lower degree, from creation itself, especially from those elements in it which are under God's special and supernatural providence. Thus the family as the Domestic Church should incorporate certain elements which are to be found in the universal Church as Christ wanted it to be; and the universal Church, in its turn, could see reflected in the Christian family, which also originated from God and forms part of God's plan of redemption, some of the elements and characteristics which should be present and operative also in her.

A further analysis of the Domestic Church concept could be made by elaborating on a number of approaches suggested by Vatican II in several of its Decrees. One of these is the notion of the Church as *communio*, understood as a 'community of communions', each of which retaining its own structure and individuality, as well as the insistence that the Church's efforts in the liturgical and ecumenical spheres do not aim at uniformity, but at essential unity. There is then that basic intuition of Vatican II known as *sensus fidelium*, which co-ordinates and throws further light on the foregoing and on many other conciliar teachings. These suggestions however, important as they are, do not fall directly within the scope of this article and could very well constitute a topic for a further study.

To conclude this article, I find no more appropriate words than a profound reflection made by the well known Catholic psychologist and family expert Jack Dominian. "The domestic Church", he says, "is the place in the universal Church where life is conceived, nourished and loved. It is the school of love for the whole Church. It is the source of love in the life of the couple and in the new life which they initiate and nurture. Without the domestic Church there can be no Church, for it is within it that love, which is the nature of God, is kept alive."³³

32. Cf. N. Rocholl, *Die Ehe als geweihtes Leben*, Dülmen 1936, 108-110; Ch. Massabki, *Le Christ rencontre de deux Amours*, Paris 1958, 105; P. Grelot, *Le couple humain dans l'Écriture*, Paris, 1969 99. On the origin and application of the method based on the use of *loci theologici*, consult Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd Edition, Paulist Press, New York 2000, 144.
33. J. Dominian, *Marriage, Faith and Love*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1981, 262. For a more complete theological presentation of the family see Maurice Eminyan, S.J., *Theology of the Family*, Jesuit Publications, Malta 1994. See also J.F. Chorpenning, "John Paul II's Theology of the mystery of the Holy Family", *Communio* (Spring 2001) 140-166, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, G.Chapman, revised ed., 1999, nn. 1656-7..

