Enriching the Church

Pastoral Letter on “The Role of the Family in the Life of the Church of Syracuse and Beyond”
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“The Joy of Love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.” With these words our Holy Father, Pope Francis opened his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love), the fruit of a two-year process during which the Church reflected on and addressed current challenges facing marriage and the family. It is with these same words that I greet you, the faithful of the diocese: priests, deacons, religious and laity.

Over decades the Church has partnered with families to provide the foundation of our Catholic faith—to hand it on and nurture it in their children. In today’s society, we must acknowledge that much of the passing on of our faith is not taking place in the home for a myriad of reasons. There is an obvious need to renew our relationship with families, no matter their make-up, and equip them with ways to live out our Catholic beliefs joyfully. Until we do that, we will not be successful in forming missionary disciples, a call we all share through baptism.

For these reasons, I am pleased to declare a Year of the Family in the Diocese of Syracuse commencing the first week of Advent, Sunday, December 3, 2017, and concluding on the Feast of Christ the King, Sunday, November 25, 2018. During this year, it is my hope that parishes throughout the diocese will reach out to parents and families in new and different ways that will result in a growing feeling of being at home in the Church and a burning desire to know, live and share the Catholic faith.

With this in mind, I am taking the opportunity to offer both a reminder and some words of encouragement to the families of our diocese so that the joy of love they experience will be a source of enrichment for the Church of Syracuse and beyond. Before reflecting on the role of the family in the life of the Church, it is important to consider the status of marriage and the family in our day.

1 Amoris Laetitia (AL), 1.
The Modern Family

The modern family is not perfect. No family in any era or at any time has ever been perfect, except for the Holy Family. It was in the context of this special family that the Gospel according to Luke tells us, “Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.”

Pope Francis, together with bishops throughout the world, has recognized that families, particularly today, are not without their flaws and struggles. Family members get sick, grow old, make mistakes, and so on. Yet, our culture and society present their view of what the perfect family should look like. Sadly, their vision of the modern family is often in conflict with God’s plan for marriage and the family, a plan revealed to us through the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. Moreover, when we as a Church propose this plan and call others to live according to it, as Christ did, we are ignored, ridiculed, and even attacked.

Having celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the apparitions at Fatima this year, I am reminded of what Sister Lucia dos Santos, one of three children to whom Mary appeared, predicted. “The final battle between Christ and Satan would be over Marriage and the Family.” Responding to this and to the reality of an increasing disregard for and hostility toward God’s plan for love, Pope Saint John Paul II established the Pontifical Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family.

Marriage and the modern family are indeed under attack. These time honored and fundamental institutions are threatened today by a variety of policies and practices from successful attempts throughout the United States and beyond to redefine marriage, to sinful actions that do not uphold the sanctity and dignity of all human life – contraception, certain reproductive technologies, abortion, and euthanasia, to name a few.

Within this wide range of serious threats, there are a number of less obvious ones. Technology is rendering members of many families today unable to communicate personally and lovingly with each other. Mobility and the plethora of options placed before members of the family are tempting them to value quantity over quality when it comes to living well. Politics are dividing them. Individualism is causing them to ignore the importance and necessity of community in the home, in the Church, and in society. Relativism is leading them to think they can be “spiritual but not religious,” causing them to abandon the faith we profess in the Creed, celebrate in the sacraments, live according to the commandments and moral teachings of Christ, and ground in a personal relationship with God through prayer. Finally, peer pressure from our society and culture is causing the members of many modern families to abandon God’s plan for marriage and the family, which – though it is not always easy to live – is what brings them true happiness in this life and in the next.

When it comes to the modern family, in general there has been a shift in focus: from the things of heaven to the things of earth. It is no wonder, then, that in many families today faith is met with indifference or abandoned altogether, hope is shallow, and charity is confused with philanthropy—simply doing nice things for others because it is a nice thing to do. For many, this has become their religion.

The results of all this are drastic. The priests throughout our diocese often share with me that many of the struggles they currently face concerning the vitality of their parishes stem from the absence both of marriages and of the presence of families in general. Many young people are no longer getting married, specifically in the Church. When they do decide to come to the Church to get married, they often arrive un-catechized and with a long list of their own expectations. These expectations, along with
their various assumptions, do not always respect the teaching of Christ with regard to marriage or the Church's liturgical celebration of this important sacrament. As a result, the number of celebrations of the sacrament of Matrimony at many parishes and around the diocese has declined to a considerably low level. In 2000, 2,083 marriages were celebrated in our parish Churches. Last year, the number was 769.

Furthermore, there is a widespread absence of families at the celebration of Mass every Sunday, in faith formation programs, in Catholic schools and in the community life of the parish. As a result, pews and classrooms around our diocese are empty, and the number of young men and women seriously considering vocations to the priesthood and religious life is small.

Nevertheless, there is a faithful remnant of strong families who regularly practice and live out their Catholic faith with conviction. I wish to acknowledge them and thank them deeply for their faithful witness and generosity. They are sustaining and enriching the Church of Syracuse and beyond. May God bless them!

My friends, it is important to be aware that the modern family is in trouble. It is being attacked from without. It faces new and challenging struggles from within. Today, more than at any time in recent history, these attacks and struggles seem to serve as serious barriers that prevent the current generation of families from receiving, living, and handing on our Catholic faith. Much more could be said about the situation of the modern family. However, I will leave it up to those of you reading this letter to recall the specific difficult situations and circumstances of families that you have experienced personally or observed. In far too many cases the modern family has strayed from God’s plan for marriage and the family and so it is necessary to revisit this important and beautiful plan, albeit briefly.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus reafﬁrms that marriage is exclusive, faithful, and permanent. By His presence at the Wedding Feast at Cana, in the Gospel according to John, Jesus emphasizes the fact that marriage is good. Indeed, it is an efficacious sign of His presence. Matrimony is a sacrament in which two Christian people receive the grace they need to carry out their responsibilities and duties in “good times and in bad.” They also receive the grace necessary to be a real symbol of God’s love. When we look at the exclusive, permanent, life-giving and faithful love that a man and a woman joined in the sacrament of Matrimony have for each other we can say, “That is how God loves us!”

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God's Plan for the Family

It is through marriage that the family comes to be. The very first chapters and verses in the Book of Genesis set forth God’s plan for marriage. They tell us that marriage is not simply a human institution, but a ‘mystery’ instituted by God. He is the author of it. Genesis also conveys the fact that marriage is written in the nature of every man and woman. They are each created in the image and likeness of God and for one another. When they enter into marriage, their union is unbreakable. Moreover, as a married couple they act as co-creators with God when they remain open to life, accepting children lovingly from Him and raising them in a faith-filled and loving home.
Marriage and the family not only form the foundation of society but are also the source from which come the members of Christ’s Body, the Church. Accordingly, marriage as a vocation and call gives to each married couple and to each family a mission. On the one hand, good marriages from which come strong, healthy, and happy families enrich the Church. On the other hand, “God has given the family the job of ‘domesticating’ the world.”11 As Pope Francis says, “By their witness as well as their words, families speak to others of Jesus. They pass on the faith, they arouse a desire for God and they reflect the beauty of the Gospel and its way of life. Christian marriages thus enliven society by their fraternity, their social concern, their outspokenness on behalf of the underprivileged, their luminous faith, and their active hope. Their fruitfulness expands and in countless ways makes God’s love present in society.”13

How do families accomplish their mission of evangelization? By forming what is called an ecclesia domestica, a “domestic church.”11 Why? Because “Christian marriage and the Christian family build up the Church; for in the family the human person is not only brought into being and progressively introduced by means of education into the human community, but by means of the rebirth of baptism and education in the faith the child is also introduced into God’s family, which is the Church.”15

**Forming a “Domestic Church”**

The Book of Proverbs wisely states, “Train the young in the way they should go; even when old, they will not swerve from it.”16 Recall for a moment your own family. Perhaps it was a stable, loving environment. Perhaps it was not. In either case, it was the environment, the immediate surrounding in which you were raised, for better or for worse. It was the context in which you learned both what to do and what not to do. The family is, therefore, where we are taught the basics.

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When it comes to our Catholic faith, the home is the “first school of Christian life” and parents are the “first heralds of the faith.” The family is where we learn “endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life.” Because of this, it is the mission of the family to evangelize. In fact, evangelization begins within the context of the family. Having first been evangelized themselves, members of the family are then able to evangelize others.

Evangelization is not a program or a specific action or activity. Rather, it is a way of life that proclaims with joy and boldness the Good News of the Gospel, namely, that by dying Christ destroyed our death and by rising he restored our life. Simply put, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. God’s love and salvation in Christ, through the Church: this is what we profess in the creed, celebrate in the liturgy and sacraments of the Church, live when we follow the commandments and moral teachings of the Church, and ground in a life of prayer. Without all of this, without a relationship with Christ and his Church, the family is not only unable to know and live the faith that we have received. Sadly, it is also unable to share it with others. When members of the family allow God’s love and salvation in Christ to shape who they are and all that they do, then they become what Pope Francis calls, “missionary disciples.” That is to say, they become faithful followers of Christ who reach out to: (1) help strengthen the faith of those who already believe in Christ, (2) proclaim the Good News to those who do not know Him and (3) encourage those who do know Him and have been baptized but have fallen away from the practice of our faith, to encounter Him anew and to return to the regular practice of faith with His Body, the Church.

At the beginning of each year, many of the priests, faith formation directors, catechists, Catholic school teachers and various volunteers in parishes around our diocese gather with the children and parents who will participate in their programs of faith formation. These initial meetings are a good time not only to go over the particulars of the year, but also to remind parents that they are the first educators of their children in the ways of the faith. No catechist, no program, no activity can take their place. All that the parish faith formation programs and Catholic schools can do is to provide the necessary tools to assist parents in their role.

This is what parents and godparents have promised at Baptism: to make it their constant care to bring their children up in the practice of the faith; to bring them up to keep God’s commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. This is not an easy task. Parents, like the apostles, face many challenges when it comes to handing on our Catholic faith to their children and grandchildren, as I noted at the beginning of this letter. Nevertheless, at the end of the celebration of a child’s Baptism, the final blessing prays that mothers and fathers will not only be the “first teachers of their children in the ways of faith,” but also “the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do.”

While it is true, “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 her Lord,” it is also true that it is the family that enriches the Church by forming a domestic or a little church of its own. In order to do so, the family must turn to God for help, for the grace He desires to give us. Pope Francis states, “If a family is centered on Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life. Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord’s cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them.”
How does the modern family strive to live God’s plan for marriage and family today, namely, by forming a domestic church of their own? Allow me to suggest a few time-honored, but very practical, powerful, and effective ways: (1) prayer and worship, (2) formation, (3) community, and (4) service.

PRAYER & WORSHIP

As the saying goes, “The family that prays together stays together.” So often we underestimate the power of prayer or we reduce it to a grocery list of things to ask of God. In reality, prayer is our response to God, who is always searching for us. In prayer, we encounter Him; we enter into a dialogue with Him. Through prayer, we become aware of His presence and His providence in our lives. Prayer reminds us that we are never alone. God is always with us.

Sadly, many families and many people today do not pray, really pray. Some simply do not know how. If the family is going to be a source of enrichment for the Church of Syracuse and beyond then it must first return to prayer together. Even a few simple words of prayer each day can do immense good for our families. Pastors and parishes throughout our diocese would do well not only to teach families how to pray together, but also to offer opportunities for them to do so on a regular basis. For example, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, Lectio Divina, Holy Hours, etc.

Pope Saint John Paul II pointed out, “An important purpose of the prayer of the domestic Church is to serve as the natural introduction for the children to the liturgical prayer of the whole Church, both in the sense of preparing for it and of extending it into personal, family and social life. Hence the need for gradual participation by all the members of the Christian family in the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sundays and feast days, and of the other sacraments, particularly the sacraments of Christian initiation of children.”

Attending Mass every Sunday is one of the top priorities for the people of our diocese that I mentioned in my last pastoral letter, *Faith: a Gift Received, a Treasure to Be Shared*. The families of our diocese need this encouragement more than anyone, and now, more than ever.

Many modern families today view Sunday Mass as a burden, something to “get out of the way,” something that does not speak to them or out of which they “get nothing.” The truth is that we were created by God to worship Him. Going to Mass is not about us – our entertainment, our busy schedules, etc. It is about God. Yet, it becomes about us because God so generously sanctifies us and builds us up when we gather together to praise Him.

Some families, some people do not attend Sunday Mass because they have lost their way or do not feel worthy. To them I say, “Come!” Perhaps you may not be able to receive Holy Communion for whatever reason, a sin you have committed in the past or in which you are currently engaged or – an irregular situation with regard to marriage. Celebrate the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and “Come!” Or, begin by simply coming to listen to the Word of God proclaimed, to praise
needed for families throughout our diocese to be formed in our Catholic faith. I encourage pastors, parishes, and schools to engage in family catechesis so that all members are growing together in our faith.

It is interesting that when it comes to the faith, most people are content with remaining at an elementary level. This would never be considered acceptable at school or in the workplace. Neither is it acceptable in the Church – domestic or universal. Faith formation is ongoing. I am grateful to the work of our diocesan ministries for helping parishes and schools to offer various opportunities for faith formation. I encourage all the families of our diocese to attend the many wonderful programs and events that are being offered in parishes and schools near you.

**Formation**

In my last pastoral letter, I also highlighted the importance of knowing, living, and sharing our Catholic faith. In order to do so we must be formed, not simply as individuals, but as families. First, as the domestic Church. Then, as the Body of Christ, the family of God. There are many ways this can take place. Regardless, it should take place in the context of the family.

I am grateful for the work that our diocesan Catholic Schools as well as our diocesan Faith Formation Office and the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry do to provide the tools needed for families throughout our diocese to be formed in our Catholic faith. I encourage pastors, parishes, and schools to engage in family catechesis so that all members are growing together in our faith.

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**Community**

As we reflected on the modern family, technology, among other things, has become a barrier to authentic communication and community building. The family is a community. The Church is a community of believers. We need each other because we were not created to be alone. I encourage the families of our diocese to make a specific and concrete commitment to spend time together. Do not let various activities or the general busyness of life get in the way of creating and living in an authentic community. Use special moments in your family life such as birthdays, anniversaries, departures, homecomings, and other celebrations as moments of prayer and fellowship. Gather around the table and share meals regularly. Put electronic devices away. Be selective when it comes to the overabundance of activities and options placed before you.

We all have a basic human need to love and to be loved. When this need is not fulfilled in the family and through our faith in the context of the Church then our young people turn elsewhere: drugs, alcohol, pornography, and even suicide. Let us not forget that the family and the Church are communities that build us up and support us in love. When the family is a strong community then the Church is strengthened and becomes an impressive “cloud of witnesses.” Please help to build up the community of the Church of Syracuse and beyond by first building up your family as a community centered on Christ.
Service

Today there is no shortage of people who want to help other people. Praise God! However, we have to be careful that charity and service do not replace worship, prayer, formation, etc. when it comes to our faith. These are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are mutually enriching. A strong Catholic identity is what helps to transform our service into charity, into that which we do to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of others, extending to them an invitation to be a part of God’s Kingdom, a part of Christ’s Body, the Church.

I encourage all families around our diocese to extend their domestic churches to provide for the needs of others and as a way of evangelizing those who have left the practice of the faith as well as those who have never heard of or experienced God’s love in and through Christ and His Church. Pope Francis reminds us, “Christian families should never forget that faith does not remove us from the world, but draws us more deeply into it... Each of us, in fact, has a special role in preparing for the coming of God’s kingdom in our world.”

How wonderful it would be for the families of our diocese to assist Catholic Charities and the various charitable programs offered by their parishes together! For example, families could serve meals together, collect items for the poor together, and participate in visiting parishioners who are sick or confined to their homes together. Doing so would incorporate prayer and worship. It would serve as formation. It would build community.

Furthermore, if done well and grounded in our faith the service in which families engage would help to encourage young people to consider the call to priesthood and religious life, a call that invites them to a life of self-sacrifice and love in imitation of Christ for the salvation of souls. As I mentioned in my last pastoral letter, we need more priests and religious to serve the needs of the Church of Syracuse. Vocations come from families. I encourage all of you to create an environment through prayer and worship, formation, community and service, in which this call can be heard and answered according to God’s will.

Conclusion

The Church of Syracuse and the Church universal is the “family of families.” It is enriched by the joy and love of domestic churches. To all the families of our diocese, I say, with Pope Francis, “You are a precious gift for the Church.” Our diocese is committed to safeguarding you and to supporting you in whatever way we can. Do not be afraid to ask for help!

When you are strong and faith-filled, so too is our diocese. Keep going forward. Keep walking together. Have the courage to be different! God will bless you abundantly.

May Mary, who with Joseph, created a home for God’s own Son help you to hear the word of God calling your families to enrich the Church of Syracuse and beyond and respond in faith, with humility and trust, as she did to God’s will for her.

To all the families of our diocese, I say, with Pope Francis, “You are a precious gift for the Church.”