



# All in the Family

One of a series • Archdiocese of Baltimore

One of the Church’s favorite terms for the family is “the domestic church.” “Hmmm. That’s not *my* family,” you might think.

Maybe you’re more Grateful Dead than How Great Thou Art. Maybe you’ve got stained glass, but only because your windows need a good cleaning. Maybe you

**For More Reading...**

- ◆ *Letter to Families*, Pope John Paul II, 1994
- ◆ *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006
- ◆ *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- ◆ *Love Letters to My Husband*, Gianna Beretta Molla

**Kid Talk**

- ◆ What do you think Jesus’ family was like?
- ◆ How does your family worship Jesus together?
- ◆ How do you live your faith at home? At school?

kneel mainly to mop up spilled milk. No doubt there are some families who make excellent examples of the domestic church. But you’re not one of them. Heck, it’s about all you can do to mumble some kind of grace before dinner.

**Are you the Smiths?** Let’s stop right there. Let’s think about that dinner. Let’s say you’re the Smith family. You probably try to eat together on some kind of regular basis. If one person’s mad at another, you try to say “sorry” and make up first, if only to avoid conditions incompatible with digestion. You each bring to the table the important and even the trivial parts of your day, and you talk about some of them.

Then everyone will probably weigh in with opinions. Whether it’s the toddler thinking about spitting peas or the

breadwinner thinking about changing jobs, the family spin – the family value system – gets applied to the issue of the day. For example, maybe you laugh at the baby. Maybe you frown. Maybe, in the Smith family experience, job changes are opportunities for growth. Or maybe they simply represent greener pastures better avoided.

There’s this everyday stuff, and then there’s the culture that’s uniquely the Smith’s – the crown for your birthday, the family cheer when someone does well, the things you’re allowed to laugh about and the things that you’re not. Sharing all this is how each of you,

over time, becomes a Smith, as each day you’re each a little bit different for having shared a meal together that night. And though things like meals may seem simple, they are an example of how husbands and wives provide the setting in which children will thrive.

In a way, the Smith family is indeed a mini-version of the bigger Church. After all, don’t we bring the same stuff of our lives to Mass each week, hoping to become more like Jesus? Think about it: We try to make up with each other and God. We offer ourselves and we listen to God’s wisdom – His family’s spin on our lives – as conveyed in the readings. And we eat. We head back out to the world fed, seeing things a little differently than we did before.

**A Holy Home: Tips for making your “home church”**

- ◆ Display a crucifix to remind you of Jesus
- ◆ Pray together before meals as Jesus did
- ◆ Teach your children to pray, ideally by your example
- ◆ Do good deeds for each other and for neighbors
- ◆ Pray for each other
- ◆ Attend Mass each week, together as a family
- ◆ Go to confession with your children
- ◆ Remember, the most important part of home is love





At church, as at home, in the very act of sharing the meal together we become family. So family and church are, really, similar in their ability to help us become a Smith. Or a Christian.

Our theology reflects these relationships. Marriage binds men and women forever. We are opposites, but we are exquisitely made for each other – unique yet only together able to create life and care for it. Mothers and fathers, in their distinctly maternal and paternal modes of love, together reflect the fullness of its masculine and feminine characteristics, and demonstrate every day for their children what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman.

Everyone passes through some kind of family experience, and for Catholics, Jesus' ideas about love that we listen to on Sunday get tried out week after week at the little church of home. Our families, then, become the testing grounds of love – schools of love, really, where children learn to love and be loved. Together we make up the larger church, and then the human family, and so the little domestic expressions of love have a very big effect. Of course, as with society at large, we don't always like each person all the time. We don't always agree. But we aim for the same goal: to give and receive love. The knowledge that we are all aiming for the same thing goes far in spanning differences among us.

Ideally the home church has a strong leader – a shepherd, if you will – who is willing to oversee the spiritual growth and moral progress of the group. Ideally, that parent has read and re-read the Scriptures to get to know Jesus, and to let God permeate his life so much that he can teach the others. And ideally, the father or mother demonstrates care so consistently that

that those in the family trust in that person's leadership. Of course, sometimes such a parent does not exist. Or comes late to a prayerful life.

Sometimes a child is a maverick by temperament or

wants to set his own course. But Scripture tells us that – although things don't always progress perfectly – if we train our children in the ways of the Lord, at some point as adults they will gain their spiritual footing. After all, we all remember the prodigal son, who embraced his father only after

trying to go it alone. So too, St. Monica. She prayed for 20 years before her wayward son, St. Augustine, experienced a change of heart.

As spouses sacrifice to create loving, stable homes for our children, we build up society itself, each family nestled among the others in a task as true as nature, as old as humanity. Not only that, our faith teaches us that the riches that married couples and our children enjoy together in this life are a sort of sneak preview of what God has in store for us in the next.

#### Pope Benedict XVI on the Family

"In the family each person, whether the smallest child or the oldest relative, is valued for himself or herself, and not seen simply as a means to some other end. Here we begin to glimpse something of the essential role of the family as the first building block of a well-ordered and welcoming society."

– May 14, 2009, *Nazareth*

God's love, both in

#### Children raised in intact married families are:

- ◆ more likely to attend college
- ◆ physically and emotionally healthier
- ◆ less likely to be physically or sexually abused
- ◆ less likely to use drugs or alcohol and to commit delinquent behaviors
- ◆ have a decreased risk of divorcing when they get married
- ◆ less likely to become pregnant/impregnate someone as a teenager
- ◆ less likely to be raised in poverty

*Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, Bradford Wilcox, Institute for American Values