

## **Panel A: Prayer as God's Presence in the Family**

### **The Essence of Prayer**

Your families are holy. Catholic tradition seeing the family as a true expression of the Church – the “domestic church”. The leader of our church is the Pope, which means “Papa,” and Papa and Mama lead the church of the home.

Each of us has received the call to holiness in our baptism. All of us are called to live a religious life. Christian parents live the vocation to married life, following this call to be like Christ, and to be Christ to others. Every parent who loves a child is called to teach and model the God who is love. Every time we pick up a crying baby, we teach the first and the most important lesson on prayer: when you cry out, someone answers. Until you believe this, you cannot pray. God is present in the ordinary times of family life, in which all we do can become prayer.

Research shows that the biggest predictor of adult religious practice is a sense and practice of religion in childhood. How do children develop an early sense of religion? According to the research, the first factor was that parents spoke about God and faith at home, in daily conversation. The Christian Family Movement, with Action Groups meeting in the home, helps those important conversations happen. In the Christian family, we learn together how to treat one another as Christ would, and to act in our world with justice, love, and humility.

When our children were little, our son asked us, “Why can't we see Jesus?” After all, we talked about him so much, why didn't he ever come over and visit? His Daddy explained to him that he is in our hearts, and we see him in one another.

### **Religion as the Main Source of Family Strength**

We don't go to Church to get holy; we go to remember that we *are* holy. The Second Vatican Council reintroduced a concept that comes from the Church's earliest tradition: the Christian family is a "domestic church". This ancient teaching emphasizes that families can embody Christ in day-to-day experiences of their lives. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. John Chrysostom expressed the ancient concept of "domestic church" most fully: "If we regulate our households properly...we will also see fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little Church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives." Chrysostom lived during the critical time when Christianity was becoming established as a social force, under the protection and control of the emperor, but he said, "God's earthly representative in the city is not the emperor, but the child's father." It is no wonder that he was martyred for resisting the emerging ideology of Christian empire.

The "domestic church" metaphor may originate from the fact that Christians met and worshipped in private homes long before they erected buildings specifically for the purpose of worship. However, activities essential to the image of church -- education, hospitality, and care for the poor -- were carried out in early Christian households -- and still are! Christian family life involves not only prayer in words, but in deeds, as well.

*Follow the Way of Love*, the U. S. Bishops' 1994 message to families, calls this concept a "rich treasure" to be reclaimed: "As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church. Your domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united with and supported by parishes and other communities within the larger Church. Christ has called you and joined you to himself in and through the sacraments. Therefore, you share in one and the same mission that he gives to the whole Church."

St. John Chrysostom did not advocate a flight to the monastery from the evil world. His idea of the domestic church was outward looking and socially responsible. If we want to reclaim the best of the Tradition, Christian families must reject all notions of the church as an elite group concerned solely with so-called spiritual matters.

Christian parents foster a character in their children that is counter-cultural, in the early church and today. The domestic church was outward looking and socially responsible: As St. John Chrysostom puts it, “When we teach our children to be gentle, to be forgiving, to be generous, to love their fellow men...we instill virtue in their souls and reveal the image of God within them. This then is our task: to educate both ourselves and our children in godliness; otherwise what answer will we have before Christ’s judgment seat? How else can we be worthy of the kingdom of heaven?” This education happens in ordinary ways at home. At family meals, our children often argued and were impolite. When this happened, we spent time practicing “nice-talk” -- how to speak with kindness to one another. Then the meal could continue.

Hospitality toward friends and strangers is another mark of the church that the Fathers of the Church emphasized: “Make for yourselves a guest chamber in your own house...have a room to which Christ may come; say “This is Christ’s cell; this building is set apart for him.”

Everything important happens at home! We come to church to ritualize and celebrate God’s presence in our family, to remind ourselves of the sacredness of every meal, every act of forgiveness, every prayer for healing, and all the ordinary actions of our lives. There is sacredness in the ordinary everyday life of a family and its interactions. In a way directly connected to the larger, institutional Church, The “little church” of the home creates rituals and traditions to symbolize who they are together.

## **The Family Modeled on the Eucharistic Banquet**

Our mission as CFM Worldwide is to build up the Church of the Home so that families can carry on the mission of Jesus. What can we do to show new families how to be truly Christian families? If you wanted to give a newly-wed couple a “Christian Family Kit,” what would it contain?

**Table Cloth:** Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am” (Mt. 18:20). In the celebration of the Eucharist, we will recognize the essential aspects of every family meal. A holy gathering for nourishment, teaching, reconciliation, and friendship happens around the family table. On special occasions, our family uses a table cloth; it helps to catch the spills! See how this resembles the altar in church.

**Crucifix:** In our dining room, we have a crucifix on the wall that we received at our wedding. We have claimed our home for Christ. The church also displays the Crucified Lord. Christian symbols in our home tell visitors who we are. At our table, we welcome those who are suffering.

**Candles:** Like in church, we use candles on our table. When we light candles on the table, we are saying: Let us celebrate. Americans put candles on cake to celebrate birthday. Candles at dinner set an intimate mood.

**Special dishes:** On the altar, we use vessels made of fine materials. In our home, our most treasured vessels may have been made by a child out of clay, presents to Mom or Dad made with love. Our son made this plate for us when he was five years old. When his son is five, I will give it to him and his wife. (He met her when he was eleven; her parents were on the National CFM Board with us!)

**Food to share:** Bread and wine, the basics of life, are used at Mass. We are also blessed when we share food and drink and tell each other about the events of our day, even when we are eating pizza and apple juice!

**Photos:** In church, and at home, we have pictures of Saints, like St. Francis. They remind us that people have gone before us in faith. In our homes, we treasure family photos of holy people who shaped our lives, like Grandma. In our family photo albums, we keep the memories of those we love and of our lives together. They tell our family story.

**Bible stories:** The Word of God is proclaimed at Mass. At home, we tell the bible stories to our children. Our children loved the pictures in this Bible story book. The readings at Mass are the family story of God's people. At the family table, we tell the stories of our activities of the day.

**Prayer books:** The Church has big liturgical books. At home, John and I use a small prayer book to pray together in the evening, in union with the larger church. We gave a copy of this book to each of our children when they left home for college.

**Balloons:** In Church, we have colorful decorations. At home, we decorate for our parties with balloons. We celebrate birthdays, graduations, weddings, and promotions.

**Band-Aids:** At Church, we have sacraments of healing. Families also carry on the healing ministry of Jesus when we care for the scraped knee and kiss the child's hand to make it better. At home, we learn to seek and give forgiveness to each other. We pray for healing; as St. James says, the prayer of the just man will be heard.

**Thanksgiving flag:** We have family customs for special seasons of the year, just as the Church has liturgical seasons. In the U.S., we have Thanksgiving Day, a time for

a big family meal. It is the biggest travel day of the year, as family members gather to eat a menu that never changes – roast turkey, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie. These special foods remind us of our deep connections. Before our meal, we pray: “Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.”

**Advent Calendar:** Church seasons, like Advent, have home expressions. Our family has used this calendar to count the days until Christmas. The little mouse jumps from day to day, closer to Jesus’ birthday.

**Joseph and Mary figures from the Christmas Crèche:** Day by day during Advent, we move Mary and Joseph and their donkey around the house. Every day they get closer to the stable. Even though our children are all grown up, we still enjoy seeing the Holy Family on the kitchen sink or the mantle or on the window sill, traveling toward Christmas.

**Conclusion:**

The Bishops encourage us: “A family is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world” (*Follow the Way of Love*). Your Christian families carry on the mission of Jesus in indispensable ways. The household is truly a little church.

God dwells with us. The signs of the Kingdom of God are all around us. We see parents sacrificing their own wants for their children’s good. We see mothers and fathers spending time together, nurturing their marriages. We see families reconciling after hurts. We see parents comforting members that are hurt. We see children urging their parents to learn and grow. We see them practicing hospitality to others, taking meals and visiting the sick and lonely. We see their Christian symbols on the house for Easter and Christmas

and identifying themselves as followers of Jesus. We see them going to church and participating in liturgy. We see CFMers organizing actions that help the poor.

To be the domestic church means that the family, “in the uniqueness of its way-of-being-in-the-world (as an intimate physical, psychological and spiritual entity) is an authentic community of believers. How is your family holy? In what ways do you see other families being holy? What will each of us do to inspire our families to see themselves as “domestic church” -- a training ground in which we become, as the Fathers of the Church taught, “good housekeepers” of God’s present and future kingdom? During the Panel Discussion time, you will be reflecting on these questions.

Thank you, delegates to the World Assembly, for your witness to God’s presence in Christian families.