

from} *Follow the Way of Love*,
a message to families from the
U. S. Catholic Bishops, 1994



The fundamental vocation of every person, whether married or living a celibate life, is the same: “Follow the way of love, even as Christ loved you.” The Lord issues this call to every family regardless of its condition or circumstances.

What you do in your family to create a community of love, to help each other to grow and to serve those in need is critical not only for your own sanctification, but for the strength of society and our church. It is participation in the work of the Lord, a sharing in the mission of the church. It is holy.

The profound and ordinary moments of daily life—mealtimes, workdays, vacations, expressions of love and intimacy, household chores, caring for a sick child or elderly parent, and even conflicts over things like how to celebrate holidays, discipline children or spend money—all are the threads from which you can weave a pattern of holiness.

A family is our first community and the fundamental way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The early Church expressed this truth by calling the Christian family *a domestic church or church of the home*.

This marvelous teaching was under-emphasized for centuries but reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council. Today we are still uncovering its rich treasure.

The point of the teaching is simple, yet profound. 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. However, 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.

You carry out the mission of the church of the home in ordinary ways when:

- You **believe** in God and that God cares about you. It is God to whom you turn in times of trouble. It is God to whom you give thanks when all goes well.
- You **love** and never give up believing in the value of another person. Before young ones hear the Word of God preached from the pulpit, they form a picture of God drawn from their earliest experiences of being loved by parents, grandparents, godparents, and other family members.
- You **foster intimacy**, beginning with the physical and spiritual union of the spouses and extending in appropriate ways to the whole family. To be able to share yourself—good and bad qualities—within a family and to be accepted there is indispensable to forming a close relationship with the Lord.
- You **evangelize** by professing faith in God, acting in accord with gospel values, and setting an example of Christian living for your children and for others. And your children, by their spontaneous and genuine spirituality, will often surprise you into recognizing God’s presence.
- You **educate**. As the primary teachers of your children, you impart knowledge of the faith and help them to acquire

values necessary for Christian living. Your example is the most effective way to teach. Sometimes they listen and learn; sometimes they teach you new ways of believing and understanding. Your wisdom and theirs come from the same Spirit.

- You **pray together**, thanking God for blessings, reaching for strength, asking for guidance in crisis and doubt. You know as you gather—restless toddlers, searching teenagers, harried adults—that God answers all prayers, but sometimes in surprising ways.
- You **serve one another**, often sacrificing your own wants, for the other's good. You struggle to take up your cross and carry it with love. Your “deaths” and “risings” become compelling signs of Jesus’ own life, death, and resurrection.
- You **forgive and seek reconciliation**. Over and over, you let go of old hurts and grudges to make peace with one another. And family members come to believe that, no matter what, they are still loved by you and by God.
- You **celebrate** life—birthdays and weddings, births and deaths, a first day of school and a graduation, rites of passage into adulthood, new jobs, old friends, family reunions, surprise visits, holy days and holidays. You come together when tragedy strikes and in joyful celebration of the sacraments. As you gather for a meal, you break bread and share stories, becoming more fully the community of love Jesus calls us to be.
- You **welcome** the stranger, the lonely one, the grieving person into your home. You give drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry. The Gospel assures us that when we do this, they are strangers no more, but Christ.
- You **act justly** in your community when you treat others with respect, stand against discrimination and racism, and

work to overcome hunger, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy.

- You **affirm life** as a precious gift from God. You oppose whatever destroys life, such as abortion, euthanasia, unjust war, capital punishment, neighborhood and domestic violence, poverty and racism. Within your family, when you shun violent words and actions and look for peaceful ways to resolve conflict, you become a voice for life, forming peacemakers for the next generation.
- You **raise up vocations** to the priesthood and religious life as you encourage your children to listen for God’s call and respond to God’s grace. This is especially fostered through family prayer, involvement in parish life, and by the way you speak of priests, sisters, brothers, and permanent deacons.

No domestic church does all this perfectly. But neither does any parish or diocesan church. All members of the Church struggle daily to become more faithful disciples of Christ.

We need to enable families to recognize that they are a domestic church. There may be families who do not understand or believe they are a domestic church. Maybe they feel overwhelmed by this calling or unable to carry out its responsibilities. Perhaps they consider their family too “broken” to be used for the Lord’s purposes. But remember, a family is holy not because it is perfect but because God’s grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew everyday on the way of love.

Like the whole Church, every Christian family rests on a firm foundation, namely, Christ’s promise to be faithful to those he has chosen. When a man and a woman pledge themselves to each other in the sacrament of matrimony, they join in Christ’s promise and become a living sign of his union with the Church (cf. Eph 5:32).