

## *Follow the Way of Love*

[from a message to families by the U. S. Catholic bishops,  
[www.usccb.org/laity/follow.htm](http://www.usccb.org/laity/follow.htm)]

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*.

As Christian families, you not only belong to the church, but your daily life is a true expression of the 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 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.
- 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.
- You **educate**. As the primary teachers of your children, you impart knowledge of the faith and help them acquire values necessary for Christian living. Your example is the most effective way to teach.
- You **pray together**, thanking God for blessings, reaching for strength, asking for guidance in crisis and doubt.

- You **serve one another**, often sacrificing your own wants for the other’s good.
- You **forgive and seek reconciliation**.
- 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.
- You **act justly** in your community when you treat others with respect, stand against discrimination and racism, and work to overcome 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.

No domestic church does this perfectly. But neither does any parish or diocesan church. All members of the church struggle daily to become more faithful disciples of Christ. 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 every day on the way of love.

While a committed, permanent, faithful relationship of husband and wife is the root of a family, wherever a family exists and love still moves through its members, grace is present. Nothing—not even divorce or death—can place limits upon God’s gracious love.

Families face obstacles as they try to maintain strong family ties and to follow their calling as a church of the home. The rapid pace of social change, the religious, ethnic and cultural diversity of our society, the revolution of values within our culture, the intrusion of mass media, the impact of political and economic conditions: All these place families under considerable stress.

Other pressures are caused by personal choices, sometimes involving human weakness and sinful behavior, and by those ordinary and inevitable tensions which rise from within. Daily you discover how different temperaments and opposing points of view can create hard feelings and even lasting bitterness.

Four particular challenges make a claim on your resources and responsibilities as a church of the home: living faithfully, giving life, growing in mutuality and taking time.

**Living Faithfully** When a woman and a man vow to be true in good times and in bad they are confirming a decision to love one another, and this decision is one they have to make over and over again, when it feels good and when it doesn't. However, an enduring marriage is more than simple endurance. It is a process of growth into intimate friendship and a deepening grace.

To live faithfully in a marriage requires humility, trust, compromise, communication and a sense of humor. It is a give-and-take experience, involving hurt and forgiveness, failure and sacrifice.

Children who care for parents stricken with Alzheimer's disease, parents who stand by their adult children even when they seem to reject the family's values, a grandparent who helps to raise the children when parents are unable, a single parent who goes to great lengths to raise and nurture the children without the benefit of the other parent: All these are living faithful lives.

- **What does love mean to you?**
- **When have you had to renew a decision to love your spouse, child or another family member?**
- **What made it difficult or easy?**

**Giving Life** Welcoming a child, through birth or adoption, is an act of faith as well as an act of love. Being open to new life signals trust in the God who ultimately creates and sustains all life. It is also the beginning of a lifetime commitment: nurturing, teaching, disciplining and, finally, letting go of a child—as he or she follows a new and perhaps uncharted way of love.

The life which you give as parents is not restricted just to your offspring. The children of other families need your guidance as do other parents who can benefit from your hard-earned experience. Likewise, you cannot raise your own children alone. All families—even those with two parents—need a wider circle of aunts and uncles, grandparents, godparents and other faith-filled families.

- **What is it in life that matters most to you?**
- **How, with whom—and when—do you share your treasure?**
- **How does your family share what it treasures with other families?**

**Growing in Mutuality** Marriage is the partnership of a man and woman equal in dignity and value. This does not imply sameness in roles or expectations, gifts or character. Rather, a couple who accept their equality as sons and daughters in the Lord will honor and cherish one another. They will respect and value each other's gifts and uniqueness. They will "be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ." Mutual submission—not dominance by either partner—is the key to genuine joy.

Mutuality is really about sharing power and exercising responsibility for a purpose larger than ourselves. Agreeing that you are equal might be easier than changing your behavior or accepting joint responsibility for your relationship. It takes hard work to really understand another's feelings or to practice shared decision making on important matters.

The pattern of mutuality within a household is closely allied with the virtue of humility. And humility is forged in prayer.

- **How has early life shaped your understanding of the roles of men and women?**
- **Where do you need to grow in mutuality?**
- **As a family, how do you show respect for one another?**

**Taking Time** Families are daily overwhelmed by the demands of work, business travel, household tasks, getting to and from school, keeping appointments with doctors, civic responsibilities and volunteering.

To thrive, love requires attention, communication and time—to share a story or confide a need, to play a game, tell a joke, to watch and cheer on—time to be present to another's failure or success, confusion, despair or moment of decision.

Spending time together builds intimacy, increases understanding and creates memories between husband and wife, parent and child, brothers and sisters, grandparents and younger family members. It is hard to imagine how a family can live faithfully, be life-giving and grow in mutuality without deliberately choosing to spend time together. Taking time together includes: making shared meals a priority, praying and worshipping together, building family traditions and rituals, and taking part in retreats and family education programs.

- **Have your lives become too fragmented?**
- **How are you balancing time commitments to jobs, community, each other and the children?**
- **What positive choices can you make this week to improve your use of time?**