

The Catholic Home

By a Catholic retreat priest.

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Dear parents,

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, called by Pope Saint Pius X "the greatest saint of modern times", wrote in one of her last letters: "The good God gave me a father and mother more worthy of Heaven than of earth." These words are inscribed over the graves of her parents, Louis and Zélie Martin (Marie-Azélie Guérin), behind the basilica of Lisieux. The Church is now considering their cause for canonization. [They were beatified in 2008.] It is clear from this example what a tremendous influence can be given to children in a truly Catholic home. At the source of the greatness of Saint Therese is the conjugal union of two whole-hearted Christians. Cardinal Mercier said: "How glad I am to know that she is the recompense of an exemplary family. We must never weary of repeating that everywhere." Yes, dear friends, there is no doubt that upon the way you raise your children will depend the way they will spiritually grow up. I will try during this conference to talk about the Catholic home.

Where to start? I think we should first put before our mind our ultimate goal: Heaven. The whole world, as you know, was created for the glory of God: the stars, the mountains, the trees and the birds. We too have been created for the glory of God, but we do not glorify God and find true happiness unless we become saints. After all, a saint is just someone who has died in the state of grace and has finished his time to expiate his sins in Purgatory and is now in Heaven. Your children are given to you as a sacred trust and you will have to render an account for their immortal souls. Catholic parents, you must absolutely realize that the last end of man is supernatural. We are all called to eternal beatitude, to seeing God face to face in Heaven. The ultimate goal of Christian education will therefore be to secure for our children this tremendous reward. Everything else (health, money, success et cetera) does not really matter. This is why Queen Blanche de Castille could tell her son, the future king Saint Louis of France: "My son, I would prefer to see you dead at my feet than to know that you were in the state of mortal sin." When we think about it, is not eternal damnation the only real evil? Let us therefore look at our family as a Catholic should look at it, that is, in the light of the theological virtue of Faith.

Now that we have set before our eyes the ultimate goal of Christian education, we can better understand the importance of a truly Catholic atmosphere in our homes. The home has always been something sacred, even in pagan times. The Greek poet Homer wrote a whole book about the story of Odysseus coming home. The Romans also considered the hearth a holy place. They had invented all kinds of domestic divinities to guard the different members of the family at every stage of childhood, adolescence and maturity. For every act of home life, there was a special mythological deity to be invoked. But of course, the institution of the family was completely super-naturalized only with the Incarnation, when God Himself chose to have parents on earth.

Jesus is truly the son of Mary, since she gave Him His human nature. Joseph is the husband of Mary and therefore by virtue of his marriage he has a certain paternity over Our Lord. Jesus is indeed

born from the Holy Ghost of the immaculate flesh of Our Lady over which Joseph had true dominion. Since their marriage was especially ordained by Divine Providence to receive and bring up the child, Jesus is the fruit of the holy union of Mary and Joseph, not as born of it but in it.

So we have a father, a mother and a child. The Holy Family is the perfect ideal for all Christians. Dear parents, look at Nazareth. See the beauty of this home where everything was centered on God. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are giving us a model of Catholic family life. When we contemplate their virtues of humility, obedience and charity, we understand the secret of the peaceful joy we see in their hearts.

It is always striking to see in the lives of the saints the role of their parents in the first years of childhood. One only has to read the life of Mrs. Sarto, the mother of Saint Pius X or of Mamma Margherita, mother of Saint John Bosco to understand this. {She was honored as Venerable Margherita Occhiena in 2006.} Children do not first receive their religious formation from books or priests, but from living the life of a Catholic home. The parents are the main channels for the first (and the most important) transmission of Christian spirituality to these young souls. A little child will grasp the first notions about God in very simple ways: He will understand the goodness of God when he sees the love of his mother, always kind and patient. He will understand the providence of God when he sees the concern of his father, earning money to put bread on the table et cetera.

The example of the parents is so important, not only for young children but especially for teenagers, since these are inclined to question authority. If you want your children to practice obedience, then do not quarrel in front of them. If you want them to learn charity, do not gossip about your neighbors.

If you want them to love to pray, then be yourselves men and women of prayer. Saint Therese said of her father during night prayer: "I had only to look at him to know how the saints pray." When I was a teenager, I remember once walking into my father's bedroom and seeing him kneeling at the foot of his bed. This sight helped me tremendously to persevere in my Catholic Faith.

We must stress that not only the example of the parents but everything in the home exerts an influence, good or bad, on the soul of the child. Just as our bodies are influenced by the material atmosphere in which we live — by its heat and cold, by the germs or dust, which it may hold — in the same way our souls are influenced by the spiritual atmosphere in which we live, by its Catholic standards or its non-Catholic standards. And we are now reaching the crux of the matter. It is a sad truth that some parents do not have this Catholic atmosphere in their home. On the contrary, the spirit of the world is allowed to prevail for the spiritual ruin of the members of the family. In reality, these homes only bear the name of Catholic but do not have the inner substance, which would then make them truly Catholic. For instance, you walk in the children's bedrooms and you see indecent posters of movie stars, instead of the crucifix and pictures of the saints. The children play with ugly monsters instead of with beautiful toys. The conversations are distasteful et cetera. Parents who deliberately neglect their duty of providing a Catholic atmosphere in their home are seriously failing in their vocation.

Dear friends, there is no doubt that if everything in the home is organized in conformity with the teachings of the Church, everyone will be greatly helped to live in the state of grace. On the contrary, if in the home are found worldly influences or occasions of sin, it will be difficult for everyone to secure their eternal salvation. However, we must point out that in spite of a Catholic atmosphere in the home, some children stray from the path of virtue. Accidents sometimes happen.

But in this case the parents are not responsible and in no way to be blamed for the spiritual loss of the child. They have done their best to raise him as a Catholic. Also, there are many homes where it is very difficult to establish a Catholic atmosphere, in spite of much good will, especially when one of the parents is not a Catholic. This is a painful situation and would need a separate conference to deal with this subject. The Catholic wife is certainly hindered in her desire to sanctify her home by the fact that her husband will disagree and often refuse to co-operate with her policies. In this conference, we are dealing with a family where both parents are Catholic. (We must note that with prudence, tact and gentleness, it is still possible to achieve much even within a mixed marriage). But now that we have introduced the topic of the conference, I am sure you are now anxious to hear in what exactly consists this Catholic spirit which must penetrate the family.

In the beginning of this twentieth century, a South-American priest, Father Mateo, started a world-wide crusade, which was extremely successful. He received the blessing of Pope Saint Pius X who even asked him to devote his life to this crusade. Our Lord had told Saint Margaret Mary at Paray le Monial: "I will bless every home in which the image of My Sacred Heart shall be exposed and honored." Father Mateo started a crusade to re-establish the social reign of Jesus Christ throughout the whole world. He had understood that to Christianize society, we must first Christianize the family. This zealous priest strove to conquer souls to the Sacred Heart through the Enthronement of the King of Love in the homes. You already know about this beautiful Catholic devotion and many of your families received the visit of the priest for this purpose. Well, it seems that we have here the answer to the question: When is a Catholic atmosphere established in a home? When everything is submitted to the reign of Our Lord, True God and True Man. And I mean everything, not only our prayers but even our recreations, our meals, our clothes, our conversations et cetera. The Enthronement is not the simple blessing of a picture and a reading of an act of the consecration. It is the beginning of a new life, a life of love for the Sacred Heart. Nothing in the home should displease Him. Jesus is the King of the family and must be honored as such.

So we see that all these are connected: Social reign of the Sacred Heart — Catholic atmosphere in the home — Sanctity of its members and their eternal salvation — Glory of the Most Blessed Trinity. Jesus is the Mediator between God and men, the Head of the Mystical Body. As the beautiful books of Dom Columba Marmion [beatified in 2000] explain, we are the adopted children of God through Jesus Christ.

Saint Paul tells us: "Be ye followers of God, as most dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also has loved us. For you were before darkness, but now light in the Lord. Walk you as children of the light, for the fruit of the light is in all goodness, and justice, and truth". The Godless world around us is plunged in a terrible darkness. Catholic families must be like little oases of light, where true Christian love is practiced, where Jesus can take refuge from His enemies. It seems that one of the first notions we have to clarify in speaking of the Catholic atmosphere is the notion of love. Maria Von Trapp wrote in the preface to the story of her family: "While writing down the memories of a family, it astonished, amazed, almost overwhelmed me to see how much love — genuine, real love — was stored in one short lifetime: first, God's love for us, His children, the leading, guiding, protecting love of a Father and as every real love calls forth love in return, it couldn't be any different here." The Catholic home must therefore be permeated by supernatural charity. But it is very important to grasp what true love is, since it has often been misunderstood in modern times.

Saint Thomas Aquinas gives us the definition of love: "To love is to wish the good of the beloved." And he means what is truly good for the person, which is not always what the person would like to

have. An example will illustrate this truth: A mother gives some medicine to her sick child to cure him. The child does not want the medicine since it tastes bitter. The mother will actually force the child to drink the medicine since she loves him and wants him to be restored to health. The same thing is true in the education of children. Too many parents have a false conception of love. Out of weakness, they do not discipline their children, they do not correct their defects; they give in to their caprices. It is a tragic mistake. In the long run, this kind of education will turn out little monsters of selfishness, used to "getting their way" in everything at home. True love is strong. Parents should also realize that they are dealing with natures wounded by original sin. Children all have evil inclinations to laziness, disobedience, unkindness et cetera. And these must be firmly checked even from a very young age. Otherwise, you will spoil your children.

It is awful to see some parents allowing their children to indulge every whim and fancy. Others seem to be afraid of exercising their authority and yield to their little ones as soon as they throw a tantrum. In these kinds of homes, children are the ones in control. They do what they want. They help themselves in the refrigerator without permission. They do not have to clean their bedrooms or help Mum and Dad around the house. They have no table manners, no politeness, no respect for adults. I think that it is the worst thing you could do to a child: to let him grow up without self-restraint. Parents who are not disciplining their children certainly do not have a true love for them.

Let us now pass on to another subject: Family prayer. It is clear that every individual has the obligation to pray. We must all lift up our souls to God to adore Him, to give Him thanks, to make reparation for our sins and to ask graces for our needs. These are the four purposes of prayer.

God made us. He is our Creator. So we should recognize His Sovereignty through prayer. But God also made the family. Therefore, the family should, under its own roof, openly pray to God. Let us imagine a family where everyone is saying individual prayers in their own rooms. Well this is not enough. All the family members should pray together as a social unit. Saint Thomas More, a great model for Catholic husbands and fathers, was a wonderful example in this regard. Even when he was suffering from the King's determination to divorce his lawful wife Catherine of Aragon, he always called all the members of his household for their daily prayers. There was a lot of headache, especially when his wife Dame Alice did not understand his refusal to take the oath of supremacy. If Saint Thomas More had not prayed daily with his loved ones, no doubt he would not have had the courage he needed to die a martyr. This brave Catholic understood the need of family prayer. Our Lord told us: "Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there I am in the midst of them." Parents, pray the Rosary with your children. It was one of Our Lady's most pressing requests at Fatima. Let us obey our good Mother.

Catechism is extremely important and alas, it is sorely neglected in many families. I think that parents have been used in the past to depend on Catholic schools for the religious instruction of their children. Now that we have very few good schools available, it is up to the mothers (with the fathers) to teach the Faith to their children. And you should start when they are very young.

Father Kelly has a good summary of the different stages in the development of the spiritual life of the little ones: "In your child's first year, you can sprinkle his bed with holy water and sign him with the Sign of the Cross. By the middle of his second year, he can learn to sing little hymns and to recognize pictures of Baby Jesus. In his third year, you can teach him that God made the universe and help him to see the Creator in flowers, birds, and other living things.

“When your child is four, he is old enough to attend Mass with you and to sit quietly. When he sees you pray, he will understand that people go to church because God is nearer to people there than elsewhere. He may learn prayers, which he will say throughout his lifetime — prayers at bedtime, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary. In his fifth year, he can begin to say morning and evening prayers as a regular procedure. Now he can be taught the difference between moral right and wrong — for example, he can understand why he should not steal. In his sixth year, before he attends elementary school, he should be able to make the Sign of the Cross and to bless himself with holy water. He will do these things as a matter of course if he sees you doing them.”

When your child is able to memorize questions and answers, then you should follow a good Catechism textbook to prepare him for his first Holy Communion. And then you can continue with more advanced material. It is a great mistake to stop religious instruction when children are still young. We need to continue to give them strong convictions so that they may be able to stand firm in their teenage years.

Beside Family prayers (Morning and Evening prayers, Angelus, Grace before and after meals) and Catechism, there are many ways of helping your children to know, love and serve God. Make the most of all the religious events like first communions, baptisms, Name days (feast of the saint after whom the child has been named) et cetera. Of course, the liturgy affords the greatest opportunity for bringing religion into the home. It helps so much when the children can see that the feasts of the Church are an essential part of family life. Each family should develop its own little customs and practices. I do not have the time to deal adequately with this aspect, but there are many good books, pamphlets and magazines on the subject. They will explain to you about the Advent wreath, the Christmas manger, the Lenten chart, the Easter eggs et cetera. Dom Prosper Guéranger, in his “Liturgical Year”, in explaining the family customs for the Epiphany, advocates a return to the “simple faith of our forefathers.” He stresses the importance of “blending the happiness of the home with the sacredness of religion.” Let us make the effort to rediscover these beautiful traditions. The Church has inspired in Catholic countries a wonderful treasure of hymns, songs, cooking recipes, stories and games to celebrate feast days. I know of no better way of getting children to love their Faith. They can see that the Church is a good mother and desires the happiness of her children.

Now I would like to point out an error frequent among Catholics (even those with a special attachment to the Tradition of the Church). It is the neglect of the natural order. Saint Thomas teaches that “grace does not remove nature but perfects it.” It means that parents have the duty not only to develop the supernatural virtues (faith, hope, charity, infused moral virtues) but also to develop the natural virtues (politeness, honesty, courage) in the souls of their children. In particular, I would like to stress the importance of the formation of the intellect. It is certain that the seeds of the interior life will grow better in a naturally wholesome mind. Some examples will make this principle quite clear. How can you expect your teenagers to appreciate the divine poetry of the liturgy (like the beautiful prayer of the Exsultet (Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven) sung during the Easter Vigil) when they were never used to the nursery rhymes and simple children's verses when they were little children? How can you expect them to enjoy Gregorian chant if they never sang the simplest folk songs when they were younger? How can they read the lives of the saints and enjoy them when they did not read in the first place, good books like “Treasure Island” and all the children's classics? Charles Peguy, a great Catholic writer, used to say: “Between culture and faith, there is in no way opposition, but on the contrary profound acquaintance.” In other words,

Christian Culture refines the sensibility of the soul and creates an atmosphere conducive to the blossoming of the spiritual life.

Once again, if you read the story of the family of Saint Therese, you will see how the Martin parents were concerned about the education of their children: stories, poems, songs et cetera. They were often playing with their children, taking an interest in their games. Yes, we can repeat this truth again and again: To be a fervent Catholic with a special attachment to the Tradition of the Church is a whole life and not just going to the Mass regularly.

I must admit that parents have an extremely difficult job in our day and age since the enemies of the Church have launched a terrible assault on Catholic homes. It is a real war on the part of Satan to try to plunge into hell the souls of your children. Let us be vigilant. Alas, some of you are still very lax in this domain.

Since this is important, let me give you a little bit of concrete advice: First of all, what would your reaction be, if I said; 'throw away your TV'. Or use it only to show old or decent movies with a video cassette recorder. (And even this should be done with moderation, for example, when the weather is bad, as a special treat for a birthday, or as a reward, and not constantly).

Think seriously about the baneful influence of television on your children. Too many parents allow their children to watch TV whenever they want, several hours a day, without any control. There is of course the danger of bad programmers (impurity, violence, worldliness, et cetera) but there is also another danger, no less harmful to children.

John Senior, in his excellent book "The Restoration of Christian Culture" points out the two principal defects of TV: its radical passivity, physical and imaginative, and its distortion of reality. Besides, TV is addictive and it slowly becomes like a drug which controls the minds of people, and little by little makes them stupid, unable to think for themselves. Fr. O'Connell says it humorously: "It is beneath the dignity of a human being to sit glued to a TV hour after hour like a hypnotized rabbit." As a priest, I can tell you that on children's summer camps you can immediately tell who is a heavy TV watcher and who is not. "TV kids" manifest signs of erratic behavior, have difficulty in concentrating, are quickly bored when not entertained, are unable to play in a creative manner, and worst of all, show a dislike for prayer and recollection.

I do not want to make this conference too long, so I will be brief concerning a couple of other points: What about Rock Music?

Some have said: 'Rock music is to be banned from your home. You have to choose: either Satan or Our Lord. We cannot be neutral. There is no in-between. There are 2 camps, 2 armies, 2 "banners", as Saint Ignatius puts it in his "Spiritual Exercises." Now Rock music is definitely in the devil's camp. Read any good book dealing with the subject and I guarantee it will convince you.'

'James' faced this dilemma and wrote:

What does the Catholic Church teach about rock music? I reject any songs that are violent, anti-Christian, satanic, et cetera.

There are definitely rock musician celebrities that are admittedly involved in satanic influences, yet rock music actually came from gospel music. I just very much enjoy the sounds of groovy music. If I were to put lyrics to the music, they'd be about good intentions or perhaps praise and worship of the Trinity and Saints.

James.

Mark P. Shea from Catholic Exchange replied:

Dear James:

Rock music, like any other art form, may be done to the glory of God, the glory of the artist, or the glory of Satan. The Church urges that it be done to the glory of God and warns against anything that leads away from or contradicts His glory. There are Catholic rock musicians out there and they do fine work. (See, for instance, the wonderful and inspiring work of artists like Bob Halligan, Junior, who is the driving force behind Ceili Rain. And he's not alone.)

So there's nothing intrinsically evil about rock per se. The Catholic Tradition has a long and rich history of taking various human forms of art and filling them with Christian content. There's no reason that can't be done with rock 'n' roll.

At the same time, it has to be faced that a great deal of rock is not about the glory of God. It is about sex, drugs, hedonism, the celebration of the self, the celebration of violence, the exploitation of women, anger, rage, fascination with the occult, and reckless individualism and rejection of God and the common good. That's not a secret.

The problem with this is that music has a peculiar power to penetrate our consciousness. Try this experiment: Recite the lyrics to a typical pop song without the music. Imagine saying it to God's face. Imagine saying it to a child as wisdom you want them to take to heart and remember the rest of their lives. If you find that what you are saying is either embarrassingly stupid or horrifyingly contrary to what you would ever tell God or a child, then chances are that, good beat and catchy hook or not, you would be better off without that song in your brain. That will still leave an awful lot of music left to enjoy.

In short, basic rule of thumb is this: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8).

Music that helps you do that is great. Music that doesn't, isn't.

So be logical. I remember once staying with a fervent Catholic family with a special attachment to the Tradition of the Church. They gave me the bedroom of their 15 year old son. There was on the wall a beautiful picture of the Sacred Heart, which made me happy. I glanced then at the cassettes on the desk and I was shocked to see that they were AC/DC tapes, one of them with the famous song "Hell ain't a bad place to be." This is a perfect example of what should not happen in a Catholic home.

The same thing is true of books. The other day I was visiting a family, and I came into the room of one of the children, and on the shelves were all the "Baby-sitters Club" and "Sweet Valley High" series (the cheap teenage romance novels). No wonder our girls become "boy-crazy" if they read only that kind of book. Dear parents, do not give rubbish to your children! It is your duty before Almighty God to surround these precious souls entrusted to your care with goodness, with truth, and with beauty. But once again, do not forget to give good example. Fathers, do not expect your sons to take an interest in good reading if they see you spending your whole week-end watching baseball, cricket or football on TV and never reading any good book! Mothers, do not expect your daughters to appreciate Catholic novels if they see you relishing silly magazines like

“Cosmopolitan”, “Marie Claire”, “Playgirl”, “Woman's Day” and “New Idea”! Let us be honest. A good rule of thumb is never to allow in our homes something Our Lord and Our Lady would not approve of.

Before concluding, I would like to mention the need for simplicity. The modern world has saturated us with false values. And so we clutter our homes with all kinds of machines, appliances and gadgets designed to make life more convenient and more pleasurable. This is not the true goal of man. We were not created and redeemed by the most precious blood of Jesus in order to worship microwave ovens and personal computers. We can use these modern devices, but with moderation, not becoming too attached to them. As Saint Paul says: “They that use this world should be as if they did not use it.” Let us love little things, let us have the spirit of poverty. Often I asked myself when I saw vocations in such a family: What was the characteristic of this home? And I found out that an important element was a generous spirit of sacrifice. Children were taught to forget themselves in order to help their neighbors (for example, visits to the sick or to the poor). Parents through their life were showing that happiness consists in doing things for God, in order to please Him. So when the children grow up, and the idea of a religious vocation comes to their mind, there is no problem in accepting the idea. The essence of the vocation is the gift of oneself. In a home where generosity and sacrifice is taught instead of worldliness and enjoyment of comfort, vocations are more easily fostered.

Dear parents, do not get discouraged. Yes, to establish a Catholic home is difficult. It is a heavy responsibility, a daunting task. But it is also a beautiful vocation with its great joys and consolations. Have confidence in the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Sister Lucy of Fatima said: “The Immaculate Heart of Mary is my refuge, especially in the most difficult hours. There I am always secure. It is the heart of the best of mothers; it is always attentive and it watches over the least of its children. How this certainty encourages and strengthens me! In Her, I find strength and consolation. This Immaculate Heart is the canal by which God makes the multitude of His graces gush into my soul.”

Let us consecrate our families to the loving Heart of our Heavenly Mother. Our Lady wants Her Divine Son Jesus to be known, loved and served in our homes. She will watch over us and lead us to our eternal home in Heaven.
