
A Lasallian Educational Community in the Context of the Domestic Church

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Introduction

A renewed emphasis on the Christian family as the smallest manifestation of Church took place at Second Vatican Council. The Church and theologians have continued to develop the ecclesiological dimensions of this idea, called Domestic Church, since the Council concluded. Much of the ecclesiology related to Domestic Church uses a definition of family that considers the traditional structure of married parents living in a single dwelling with their child(ren). Some scholarship has attempted to expand the definition of family to include the traditional nuclear family model, other versions of the family that more closely model the family anthropologies that exist in society today, and a diverse array of other social structures. The Domestic Church is the concept of the Christian family living together as a community and living out Gospel values in the context of everyday life.

An opportunity to expand the theology of the Domestic Church has implications for the role of other types of charism-based movements within the Church that have a functional relationship to the role of family in the lives of its members. The Lasallian charism in the Roman Catholic Church is one such charism-based movement that developed from the life, teachings, and works of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. De La Salle intertwined innovative educational techniques with a particular style of spirituality to create a new ministry in the Church. The concept of accomplishing the Lasallian mission in the context and support of a community is a foundational support of Lasallian spirituality. Lasallian educational communities have many of the same qualities in the daily life of Church that the Church has assigned to the families, and the educational communities that follow this charism are even labeled as the Lasallian Family. The expansion of the ecclesiology of Domestic Church to include movements like the Lasallian Family can effectively include a wider population of Catholics who are not members of traditional families into a parallel structure of Domestic Church that will also nurture their faith. The theology of the Domestic Church can be expanded to include a broader group of contemporary Catholics that may not be included in a traditional family structure, and in doing so will strengthen the foundation and richness of the People of God.

Historical Roots of the Domestic Church

Although Jesus teaches about the family in the Gospels, the actual theology of the Domestic Church has its roots in the patristic period of the Church. Saint John Chrysostom believed that holiness could be attained in the context of a family, which he called "a little Church." He believed that all of the important faith formation and community based learning objectives from a parish/house church also occurred on a smaller scale in a Christian family. Mary Anne Foley relates,

He supports this claim by noting that within the Christian family, all the important elements of Church are present: the table of the Word, hospitality, witness to faith, and especially the presence of Christ.²

When Chrysostom's criteria for the elements of an authentic description of Church are considered, the image of a monastic community comes to mind. However, the criteria were also used by Chrysostom to develop an alternate path to salvation apart from the monastic ideal. He recognized that the vast majority of Christians were not involved in monastic life, and there was a legitimate path to salvation for the Christian family living in the context of the secular world. He developed the ecclesiology of a little Church within the family dynamic that is the optimum structure to give access to holiness for the laity in the context of their daily lives. The theme of the holiness of the laity within the world developed even further after Second Vatican Council.

Saint Augustine also adds to the tradition of a little Church by comparing the father in the family to the local bishop in reference to leadership and direction in the area of salvation. Foley contends, "In both cases the models of both church and family governance are patriarchal . . ."³ Saint Augustine believed that the family structure was a model for Church structure in this regard. The presence of the patriarchal structure is essential when analyzing the structure of the Domestic Church that must be re-considered later when it is placed in the post-modern context. Family structures in the United States of America no longer fit a common structural model, especially one that is patriarchal in nature. The patriarchal hierarchy as a means of guiding others to salvation would closely resemble the sociological hierarchy found in family life at the time but needs further review in today's society. It would play a large part in the development of the Christological hierarchical model of Church that would govern the overall Church until Second Vatican Council.⁴ However, the ecclesial understanding of the family as a little Church was not especially employed as a means of supporting the Christian family or included in any systematic development in theology until Second Vatican Council.

Rediscovering the Domestic Church at Second Vatican Council and Beyond

Bishop Pietro Fiordelli, an advocate of the Christian Family Movement, is credited with the re-introduction of the Domestic Church as an important structure within ecclesiology. Fiordelli believed that the sacrament of marriage and the Christian family were at the heart of the Church, and he built on the foundations of Saints John Chrysostom and Augustine to include language related to the Domestic Church in the discussions preceding Second Vatican Council.⁵ His intention was for the Church to recognize and understand the potential and holiness of family life and the normal lay structure of life within the Church. The alignment of a family structure and the sacrament of marriage in the Domestic Church would become an important aspect of post-conciliar ecclesiology because of the seeds that Bishop Fiordelli planted in the early Council discussions.

The interventions from Fiordelli about the importance of recognizing the role of family in the Church eventually make their appearance in *Lumen Gentium*. The document states,

Finally, Christian spouses, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony, whereby they signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and His Church, help each other to attain to holiness in their married life and in the rearing and education of their children . . . The family is, so to speak, the domestic church.⁶

By fighting so hard to include a concept of the Christian family in the New Pentecost after Second Vatican Council, Fiordelli was at least able to plant a seed at the Council about the importance of the structure of the Christian family as was commonly in existence at the time in the life of the Church.

This brief reference to the Domestic Church also coincided with a shift in theology that took place at the Council. The pre-conciliar vertical structure of power (i.e., bishop over people, father over children) developed into a more horizontal or co-responsible communal approach to Church with models such as People of God and Body of Christ. Wijlens remarks,

The Second Vatican Council contains two theologies that stand in juxtaposition; one displays a more Trinitarian communion model, the other reflects the Christological hierarchical model.⁷

The two remarkable developments of recognizing the Domestic Church and creating a parallel understanding of Church occurred separately, but the sociological development of family life in the post-modern world makes the two inextricably relevant to one another. The two parallel developments are also important to an expanded application of the Domestic Church in the post-modern Church.

It is also important to understand the characteristics of a family that make it “a little Church” as Saint John Chrysostom called it or a Domestic Church as Second Vatican Council described it. Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, a response to the Bishops’ Synod of 1980 on Family Life, created a broader sacramental foundation for the Domestic Church that also included baptism and applied specific characteristics to the nature of the Domestic Church.

Mary Anne Foley sums up the characteristics of the Domestic Church in *Familiaris Consortio* by stating,

The document elaborates the meaning of the phrase by asserting that God has entrusted families with four tasks: forming community of persons, serving life, participating in the development of society, and sharing in the life and mission of the Church.⁸

These characteristics make the Domestic Church into a place where love for the Gospel and the Church is initially taught and felt. It is in this context that the evangelical mission of the Church is fostered among young Christians and practiced by parent to child. Whether they have a vocation to the priesthood, consecrated life, or laity, this is where young Christians are instructed in the faith so that they can pass that faith on to others through evangelization. The early

catechesis and the instruction in the norms of the larger Church, allow the larger People of God to function. It is in the context of the Domestic Church that Christians live out the fundamentals about being part of a community. If the theology has in fact shifted to the Church more as a Trinitarian communion, then the community in a context of baptized members of a family is the first example of this type of encounter occurring.

Another development that occurs in *Familiaris Consortio* is the shift in the sacramental understanding of the Domestic Church. Previous discussion about the Domestic Church used marriage as its foundation because marriage was the sacramental bond out of which the family unit flowed. Pope John Paul II certainly agrees with this theology throughout the document and states,

Christian marriage and Christian family build up the Church . . . The Church thus finds in the family, born of the sacrament, the cradle and the setting in which she can enter the human generations, and where these in their turn can enter the Church.⁹

However, he also shifts the focus from a total dependence upon marriage to a foundation of baptism as well. Foley states,

Moreover, it [*Familiaris Consortio*] claims that the domestic church is constituted on the basis of the baptism of its members, and not simply by the sacrament of marriage.¹⁰

The shift to baptism desexualizes the bonds that create the structure of Domestic Church by removing the solitary foundation of marriage in its structure. Instead it puts its validity on its nature as a communion of baptized persons.

Pope John Paul II's inclusion of baptism as a foundational sacrament for the Domestic Church, the shift in ecclesiology from exclusively hierarchical to communal, and the refinement of the characteristics of a Domestic Church allow for a greater reflection on its role and importance to the universal Church in the twenty-first century.

Issues Concerning the Domestic Church Today

The Domestic Church in the context of the Christian family is an important ecclesial structure because of its role as primary formator in the life of the Church. This is the “church” in which members spend the most time and, thus, becomes a place that creates the strongest bonds among members. Commenting on attempts to expand the application of the Domestic Church, Joseph Atkinson describes several concerns about the modern appropriation of the Domestic Church to structures outside of the Christian family. His major concern regards the legitimacy of baptism as the sole sacramental foundation for the Domestic Church. Without the clearly defined characteristics that accompany a family that emerges out of sacramental marriage, he relates,

The danger is that domestic church can become a “concept” into which anyone of us can pour one’s own “content”: we can then have preferences as to its meaning. The non-objective approach leads inevitably to restructuring the very identity of the family.¹¹

Atkinson fears that if Domestic Church can mean anything, then it means nothing. Subjectivity will leave the concept of family so open to diversity that its very usefulness as a structure is brought into question. A subjective interpretation can especially bring confusion to the faithful when the structure of the Domestic Church does not fit with the moral teachings of the Church regarding family (i.e., same sex unions, remarriages, unmarried parents, etc.). This subjectivity is especially important to evaluate as the accepted versions of family life and commitment has expanded in our post-modern Western society.

Atkinson does leave some room, however, to expand the concept of the Domestic Church. He further states,

As long as any specific diversity is not contrary to the fundamental structure of the family in Christ, there is no problem. When it is, it becomes destructive of this reality.¹²

According to Atkinson then, the actual structure of the Domestic Church is not essential so long as its unique structure does not contradict the moral teachings of the Church. An example of authentic Domestic Church could then be a widow raising children, but it could not be a same sex union raising children. Florence Caffrey Bourg is very careful to be as definitive in her own evaluation of authentic structural diversity in the Domestic Church. She states,

I am convinced that the most essential and distinctive feature of domestic churches is not an observable activity or demographic configuration. Rather, it is the way members see and interpret the world and their lives.¹³

A window of structural diversity does leave open the possibility for creativity in the consideration of the Domestic Church.

The need for such a creativity surrounding the Domestic Church is critical for our Church in a post-modern world exactly because of the changes in societal norms. The official 2016 United States Census numbers indicate changing trends in the structure and effectiveness of family life in the United States. One analysis states, “Between 1960 and 2016, the percentage of children living in families with two parents decreased from 88% to 69%.” The same analysis indicates that married couples make up 68% of families with children under 18 compared to 93% in 1950.¹⁴ There are numerous sociological and economic reasons for the decreases in these percentages, but the impact on the theological understanding of family cannot be discounted. If theological development were to continue to limit the concept of the Domestic Church to only a traditional family expressed solely through the sacrament of marriage, there could be extreme consequences for the broader impact that the Domestic Church can have on the overall Church.

The four tasks of the Domestic Church found in *Familiaris Consortio* – forming community of persons, serving life, participating in the development of society, and sharing in the life and mission of the Church – are essential for both the understanding and practice of our faith on parish and universal level. The declining number of sacramentally married families that would qualify for status as the Domestic Church make it more and more difficult to grow and nurture the faith on a basic structural level. Richard Rymarz adds to this issue by stating about Christian families,

Families can find it difficult to build up spiritual capital and often experience themselves living out a day-to-day reality that is little different from other families in the culture.¹⁵

It is difficult enough for a fully intact Christian family to accomplish the four tasks of the Domestic Church, but it is even more difficult for families composed of alternate structures to accomplish the four goals, be an inclusive ecclesial structure for the laity, and be a witness of an authentic Christian community. What does this mean for the ecclesiology and future mission of the Church? If the societal family structures upon which the theology of Domestic Church are steadily changing, what structure will offer the four characteristics of the Domestic Church as found in *Familiaris Consortio*?

An Alternate Model for the Domestic Church: Lasallian Family

One alternate model of the Domestic Church could be charism-associated movements that can often be substituted in both structure and purpose for the traditional model of the Domestic Church and still achieve the desired outcomes of *Familiaris Consortio*. One such movement is known as the Lasallian Family and takes its initial inspiration from the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. The Lasallian Family incorporates all members of the community in a Lasallian educational institution including Religious Brothers, lay faculty and staff, students, alumni, and parents. The movement began after Second Vatican Council, when the Brothers convened a General Chapter that advocated sharing the Lasallian charism and mission with colleagues. This movement of sharing the charism and participating in a community steadily grew until the modern context of Lasallian Family was created. Brother Antonio Botana, FSC, a Lasallian scholar, relates:

The expression “Lasallian Family” designates all those who participate in the Lasallian educational enterprise, especially those who are moving toward a sharing of the spirit and mission of Saint John Baptist de La Salle. For that reason, by a process of initiation, formation, and accompaniment, the Districts, will stimulate groups among the Lasallian partners that will make possible a greater commitment.¹⁶

Brother Antonio reflects extensively on the characteristics of this particular charism-based movement: a common charism for collective identity, a commitment to living or ministering in communion for the mission, an inclusion of many people involved in the mission into the family, and a proper formation program of the group’s values and beliefs.¹⁷ Although Atkinson has argued for some diversity in the structure of the Domestic Church, he was also very specific that no aspect of any authentic diverse structure could be opposed to Church teaching. The characteristics of the Lasallian Family must be compared then with the four core characteristics of the Domestic Church that Pope John Paul II described in order to meet some standard of authenticity. Even Brother John Johnston, FSC, a former Superior General of the Brothers, stated about the Lasallian Family,

The words culture, values, and faith are not easy to define. Unless we take the time to arrive at a common understanding of their meanings, we run the risk of fomenting confusion rather than enlightenment.¹⁸

Therefore, a careful inspection of the common characteristics must determine the authentic nature of a Lasallian Family and its ability to act in the role of the Domestic Church.

The first characteristic of a Domestic Church is forming a community of persons. De La Salle based much of the Lasallian spirituality and charism of his foundation on the need for community to support mission. He modeled the original *Rule* for the Brothers on the Trinitarian model of communion. Brother John relates,

The school will be a living community where young people, coming from different social and family backgrounds, educate one another by mutual understanding, respect, openness of mind in dialogue, acceptance of the uniqueness and limitations of each, growth in the spirit of service, and the practice of justice and fraternal charity.¹⁹

He concludes his remarks by declaring,

A strong spirit of community must characterize our Lasallian schools, a spirit of community that manifests itself in what John Paul II calls the virtue of solidarity.²⁰

Brother John's remarks confirm the characteristic of community as a shared element between the Domestic Church and the Lasallian Family.

The second characteristic of the Domestic Church is serving life. How is the ordinary life of Christians used to reflect God's presence in the world? Gaillardetz explains,

. . . the ecclesial dimension of family life [is not located] in religious objects, liturgical feasts or practices imported from the larger church but in the basic rhythms central to authentic family life: welcoming, letting go, recreation, conversation, resolving disputes, etc.²¹

The routine of daily life in the Lasallian Family is most regularly centered around a school in which students welcome each other, recreate, converse socially or academically, fight and forgive, eat together, pray together, and follow a basic rhythm of life that mimics the rhythms of family life together. It is often in the context of the Lasallian Family where students feel the unity of a communion that serves life in the midst of their own family lives that may not be structured or appropriate for Christian expression. The Lasallian Family provides time, space, and communion to enable the subtle and academic catechesis of young people in a Gospel community. In this respect, a Lasallian Family would meet the necessary criteria to be a Domestic Church.

The third characteristic involves participation in the development of society. Lasallian schools are particularly designed to provide activities that enhance this characteristic. Based on a mission to announce the Gospel to the poor through education, the Lasallian Family develops a curriculum which includes Catholic social thought and creates opportunities of praxis which allow all members of the community to participate in activities that promote social justice. Brother John states:

You are all well aware that solidarity with the poor is an essential dimension of the tradition of the Institute and therefore of our Lasallian mission today . . . Our schools need to offer young people programs which: 1) enable them to know and understand the injustices that exist at every level of society; 2) learn the social teachings of the Church; 3) have the opportunity to serve the poor, the sick, the aged; 4) participate in follow-up discussions and evaluations.²²

Examples of the praxis would include service learning groups known as Lasallian Youth/Collegian Groups, diverse inclusion in the community which allows for the acceptance and understanding of the diversity of others in the community and in the broader society, and a preparation for a lifelong concern for the development of a just society based on Gospel values.

The final characteristic advocates sharing in the life and mission of the Church. It is here that the Lasallian Family displays its Catholicity. Although the Lasallian Family does have members who are not Catholic, the life of the Catholic Church and prayer is taught in religion classes, prayers begin each class period, and regular participation in the sacraments is provided for the community.

There are some obvious differences between a Christian family and the Lasallian Family. Pope John Paul II emphasized that the sacramental foundation of the Domestic Church included baptism. A traditional Christian family would most likely include exclusively baptized members, but the inclusive nature of the Lasallian Family includes all who wish to be a part of the charism. This is a challenge to the definition of the Domestic Church, but it is also an opportunity for the Lasallian Family to participate in the Church's primary mission of evangelization. Through the bonds of common experience and participation, the Lasallian Family can be a place of witness and conversion that may transcend familial relationships.

Two issues that require further theological exploration are the issues of permanence and the lack of a formal connection between the Lasallian Family and parish life. The traditional Domestic Church emerges from a physical, familial bond developed out of marriage. The existence of a blood relationship necessarily makes the Domestic Church a physical relationship of permanence while all its members are living. While familial ties do not necessarily guarantee permanent emotional, psychological, or spiritual relationships, the lack of "a genetic bond" does weaken the bond of any permanent commitment. The Lasallian Family does not contain such "a genetic bond." Students eventually graduate or leave the school community, and the faculty and staff may also leave for other employment opportunities. Even Brothers are transferred within the global Lasallian Family to various local communities within the Lasallian Family when needs exist. Permanence cannot be guaranteed.

The communities of the Lasallian Family are associated with the Catholic Church but not necessarily formally connected to a parish community. The traditional understanding of the Domestic Church is one of a community within a community. In other words, many Domestic Churches come together to form the parish. They feed the parish, but the parish also addresses their own spiritual and communal needs. Both of these issues require significant theological reflection in relation to the ecclesiology of the Lasallian Family.

Conclusion

The concept of the Domestic Church has developed from a description of the role of holiness of a Christian family in patristic times to a theology of communion in post-Second Vatican Council times. Shifting sociological norms, however, alter the presence and impact of the traditional Christian family in the Church and Western society. Despite the changing sociological structures, the workings of the Domestic Church remain important for the mission and operation of the larger Church. Charism-based movements such as the Lasallian Family may be an alternative to provide the catechesis, formation opportunities, spiritual and emotional support, and necessary human relationships that lead to evangelization, membership and a Christian lifestyle in the Church today. Additional theological examination on charism-based movements and their role as alternatives to the Domestic Church can strengthen the foundation and richness of the People of God.

Endnotes

1. Brother Daniel Gardner, FSC, a Brother of the Christian Schools, has spent most of his ministry as an elementary and secondary teacher and administrator. He currently works as a graduate school advisor, adjunct lecturer in religious studies, and spiritual director.

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3. Foley, page 356.

4. Myriam Wijlens, "Sensus Fidelium – Authority" in *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology*, eds. Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017), page 131.

5. Michael A. Fahey, "The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II" in *The Family*, eds. Lisa Stowe Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *Concilium*, no. 4 (1995), page 86.

6. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, no. 11, Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

7. Wijlens, pages 130-131.

8. Foley, page 363.

9. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 15, Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

10. Foley, page 363.
11. Joseph C. Atkinson, "Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation," *Theological Studies* 66, no 3 (September 2005), page 603.
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14. US Census Bureau, "The Majority of Children Live with Two Parents, Census Bureau Reports," <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>, 2016.
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17. Botana, pages 58-64.
18. John Johnston, FSC, "Seven Hallmarks of a Lasallian School," Lasallian European Congress presentation, Strasbourg, March 1994, in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 2, no. 2 (2011), page 7.
19. Johnston, page 5.
20. Johnston, page 6.
21. Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Christian Household as School of Discipleship" in *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church*, eds. T. Knieps-Port Le Roi, Gerard Mannion, and Peter DeMey (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), page 113.
22. Johnston, pages 10-11.