

Families on Mission

Participating in the Mysteries of Christ

I would imagine that nearly every priest in ministry has had the experience of hearing the confession of a child who confesses missing Sunday Mass. Now, when you are a priest and you hear this confession from a child, someone who cannot drive, you think to yourself, “This is not really your sin. You are not old enough to drive and get yourself to Mass.” Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the parents to get their children to Mass. Young children are dependent on their parents to take them to Church so they can receive the graces of the sacraments.

This month we continue a series of articles looking at marriage and parenting through the lens of the promises priests make at their ordination. The third promise that a priest makes at his ordination concerns his central role in the sacramental life of the Church. He is asked: “Do you resolve to celebrate faithfully and reverently, according to the Church's tradition, the mysteries of Christ, especially the sacrifice of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for the glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people?”

When we think of parents as co-pastors of their own Domestic Church, this third promise highlights the privilege and responsibility they have to oversee their own sacramental life as well as the sacramental life of their children. As co-pastors, of course, moms and dads who are not ordained priests who preside over Mass or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet I believe the words “faithfully” and “reverently” in this promise can be helpful for parents as they consider their role as co-pastors of their own family.

The first disciples loved Jesus and practiced the faith because of that love. They evangelized by sharing with others who Jesus was for them and why they loved to receive the Sacraments.

That is what we are talking about here. Parents, like all of us, continually grow in their relationship with the Lord and the Sacraments of the Church. When they share with the children why they do that, how it is a privilege and a responsibility, then they become role models for their own children. Children who watch their own parents prioritizing Sunday Mass, recognize and learn that the most important thing on the weekend involves the Church. School activities, birthday parties, sporting events and everything else has to fit around Mass for their family. This witness is incredibly formative for children and stresses the importance of Mass in growing closer to Christ.

Likewise, when children witness their parents faithfully going to Confession and then they follow them to make their own Confession, this teaches them the priority of this Sacrament and its importance in their own relationship with Jesus Christ. The grace of the Eucharist and the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can then have the positive and strong effects in the life of the family that our Lord wants them to have, just as they do in the life of a parish.

In order to make sacramental life more convenient in this modern world, most parishes in the United States have adopted the practice of holding parish-wide penance services in Advent and Lent. A group of priests will come to a parish so that the faithful can make confession in a communal service in preparation for Christmas or Easter. These services are an excellent opportunity for a family to join with other families to more faithfully participate in the sacramental life of the Church. I would offer this caution. One unintended consequence of these services is that many Catholics have started to think that they only really need to go to Confession twice a year. But think for a moment; we don't commit sins just twice a year. It is not necessary or healthy for us to carry in our conscience and on our soul for months at a time sins that our Lord is waiting to absolve. Parents would do well to recognize that it is a stronger witness and more true to the spiritual life to faithfully attend Mass every week and go to Confession on some regular basis. These days many of us use electronic calendars. One could create an

automatically recurring appointment titled “Jesus wants to set me free,” and it would remind the family that it is time to go again.

Second, when parents conduct themselves reverently at Mass and when going to make Confession, then this reflects the weight and gravity of these sacraments for our life with Jesus. Children who witness their parents praying during Mass and preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation will learn the importance of these gifts. When parents stress the centrality of the sacramental life and conduct themselves accordingly, children will model their behavior after them. Children will believe that Jesus Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, body and blood, soul and divinity, because their parents' reverence and conduct reflect the truth of this mystery and because their parents explain it to their children, who watch their parents take seriously the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They will learn that sin has consequences in our lives and relationships, but that in absolution, the forgiveness of those sins, there is freedom and joy in Christ.

Just as pastors in their parish do such a tremendous service to the faithful by making the sacraments regularly and easily available, so the parents can do the same for their children as they fulfill their role as co-pastors of their Domestic Church. May the Holy Spirit fill your hearts and so give you the grace to faithfully and reverently receive the gifts of Christ in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation.