

Is living a holy family life possible?



In light of both Mother's Day and my preparations for the upcoming Catholic Family Life Symposium (CFLSymposium.org), I've been reflecting a lot on the holiness of family life. It's a nice idea on paper, but when we think of our own families, I'm guessing most of us don't think, "Holy Family," so much as we think, "holy cow!"

Family life is often messy. So how does that square with the idea that it is also holy? Is a family only holy to the degree that it can spend time in prayer or in service to others? Or is there something more to it?

Theologian Philip Mamalakis responds to this question forcefully in the book "The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church." He writes: "It is not the imposition of religious rituals on the family that makes it sacred, but the presence of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in each member, and each person's response to Christ in each interaction, that makes family holy. The religious rituals serve to support these interactions within family life. Families are not church only when they read Scriptures, pray, study the Faith, or help the needy. They are church in their (turning toward) love, and it is Christ's love that constitutes the church of the home."

Here are a few more reasons the Church asserts the grace-filled nature of the domestic church.

1. Family life was instituted by God

Attempting to reinvent the family isn't a new game. Historians have clay-pot records of all kinds of household arrangements

going back to 1800 B.C. Humans always have thought of a million different ways to do family. It is true that there are strong social-science arguments to be made for the idea that the traditional family – understood as one man in a lifelong committed relationship to one woman and the children they have together – is the most stable, most satisfying and most socially beneficial household arrangement. Even so, the notion that this is the ideal family arrangement is ultimately not discovered by humans, but revealed to us by God. The Father, himself, instituted the human family in the Garden of Eden when he told Adam and Eve to “go forth and multiply.” Further, he gave us his Son who, by choosing the wedding at Cana for his first miracle, gave marriage and family life sacramental dignity, asserting that this union was a sacred reality capable of conveying sanctifying grace.

In fact, St. John Paul referred to marriage as the “primordial sacrament” in that it serves as the foundation and model for the holy, unifying, life-giving love that all the other sacraments are meant to convey between Christ the Bridegroom and his Church, the bride. This vision of the human family wasn’t invented by us. It was given to us as a gift from the God who wants to call all of humankind into the divine family that is the Church.

2. Family life conveys God’s love

In Ephesians 3:17-19, St. Paul reminds us that the heavenly Father is the only appropriate source from whom Christians get our idea of everything a good parent is called to be. As Cardinal Marc Oullet writes in his book “Divine Likeness,” in this passage from Ephesians, “(St. Paul) emphasizes that every fatherhood, both heavenly and earthly, takes its name from the one and only Father revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ as his Father and the Father of us all.”

From the Catholic point of view, the traditional family exists primarily because God gives the fundamental and universal

means to share his love and show his face to the world. Loving mothers and fathers, together made in God's image, represent the face of God to their children and convey God's blessing from one generation to the next.

3. Family life facilitates graceful change

Like any sacrament, marriage and family life is about learning how to love more perfectly, more sacrificially, more completely. If we are serious about having a good marriage and family life, we have to work for it. We have to be willing to be less selfish, more vulnerable, more generous, more charitable, more caring, just ... more. As Pope Francis points out in *Amoris Laetitia* ("On Love in the Family") few of us will ever have a better opportunity to practice loving each other with the love that flows from God's heart – the love described in 1 Cor 13:4-8 – than we will in family life.

These are just a few of the myriad reasons the Church thinks that family life, for all its faults and struggles, is holy. In this month when we celebrate both moms and the families they love, let's not forget that family isn't just something you have. It's one of the greatest instruments God uses to draw us back to him.

Dr. Greg Popcak is the author of many books, including his latest, ["Unworried: A Life Without Anxiety"](#) (OSV, \$16.95).