

Teaching the Way of Love

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Can You Celebrate Your Family in the Face of Imperfection?

Over the past ten months, we have reflected on various themes about what it means to be a family. In doing so, we have been joining the Church in an ongoing reflection. This reflection could be said to begin with Pope Saint John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Familiaris Consortio*, "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World," written in 1981. The bishops of the United States continue it today in response to the Synod on the Family in 2014. One purpose of this ongoing reflection is to give families a vision of the profound meaning of the family and the lofty mission God gives to



parents. Another goal is to examine the concrete reality in which the modern family lives, including how modern culture can empower families and the obstacles modern culture puts in reaching the fullness of God's plan. Along the way, we hope to pick up tools and strategies to help the family "be what you are," as Pope Saint John Paul II challenges us in his Apostolic Letter.

Being a father of teenagers makes me painfully aware of the gap between the ideal that God gives us for the family and the reality of my own family. Building a community within my family was more difficult than my wife, and I thought it would be. Some of the values we tried to instill in our children are now points of conflict as our kids become young adults and start exercising their free will in earnest. Perhaps you felt the same awareness and frustration as you have reflected with us on the family over these past months.

God does not offer us high expectations and ideals to shame or frustrate us. His Fatherhood is the template of good parenting. He provides high expectations only in the context of His infinite love. The reason the image He offers us of the "ideal family" is to invite us into the fullness of His goodness. However, God also knows that parents are fallen human creatures, as are children. He does not hold it against us. Instead, He continues to invite us to perfection and to offer His wisdom and grace to help us as we strive to reach it.

So how can you and I, as parents, respond to God's goodness in a way that blesses our families? The first step is to take the time to celebrate your family. One thing our culture does that blesses families is to

commemorate Mother's Day and Father's Day. These public celebrations of family remind us of the value that we add to society and all of humanity by raising children to be good citizens and loving, virtuous adults. But we don't need to wait for official days to celebrate our families. No matter how far you think your family is from the ideal, family is always a blessing worth celebrating. Why not declare a Sunday afternoon this summer as "family day"? Do a backyard cookout. Eat and play together. Then affirm each member of the family and your relationship with each other. Tell each other, "I love you," and pray in thanksgiving for your family. My teenagers may say that's a stupid idea. Regardless, they will get the message that they are loved and worth celebrating. It's also good for us as parents to see the goodness in our family as they are.

The second step in responding to God's goodness is to continue striving for the God-given meaning and purpose of family. Continue doing the work of parenting, and try to do it with charity and joy. Charity means making necessary corrections for the good of our children because we want them to grow into virtuous adults. Joy means the fulfillment of our mission as parents. It doesn't mean feeling good about parenting all the time. But even amid frustration, we realize that we are doing God's will in loving each other and drawing each other to Heaven. Recollect the ideals that spoke to your heart over the last ten months. Work positively, moving your family closer to the goal.

Being parents means striving to build your family into a well-ordered community that listens to each other and cares for each other. It means to do the hard work of instilling virtue in your children so your family can, in turn, have a positive impact on the culture. It means building a school of prayer and holiness. Those are lofty goals. But we don't do it alone. God blesses us with His grace even as He calls us to greater aspirations. Being a family is not easy. It's not supposed to be. Nonetheless, it can be joyful, and we should celebrate every step!



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