

Ministerial Applications of *Evangelii Gaudium* for the Domestic Church

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In *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis calls for evangelization that shines with the joy that comes from being beloved sons and daughters of God. The Exhortation, written after the 2012 Synod of Bishops on “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,” is an impassioned call to evangelize the whole world, excluding no one: “For, if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (EG 8). He invites the whole Church to take up this mission anew, to undertake a process of conversion through discernment, purification and reform (30). This pastoral conversion is meant for each expression of the Church universal, for every baptized person. The families of baptized believers, the Domestic Church, are included in this call to conversion and evangelization, since their daily lives are “a true expression of the Church.”¹ In word and example, members of the Church need to say to their own children, to their extended families, their neighbors, and coworkers: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (EG 164).

How can catechetical and pastoral ministers assist Christian families in their mission to cultivate the kingdom of God in society, in other words to be *active* agents of evangelization? This paper will explore what we mean by the Domestic Church and how families of all kinds can carry the joy of the Gospel to the world, beginning at home and radiating outward. Then, it will

¹ USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love, A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to Families*, on the occasion of the United Nations 1994 International Year of the Family, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/follow-the-way-of-love.cfm>

describe some challenges they experience, so that we may be sensitive to their concerns. The aim of this discussion is to suggest concrete ways ministers can accompany families for joyful lives in Christ.

Recognizing the Domestic Church

From the earliest Christian times the families of baptized believers were thought of as forming an ecclesial as well as social reality that was a sign of God's love in the world. New Testament Christians experienced the Church in their own households, baptizing their children and other household members (Acts 11:13 ff.; 16:15; 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16) and worshipping together in their homes (Acts 2:46a; Acts 12:12; Acts 16:40; Rom. 16:3, 5; Philem. v.1-2).²

Although St. John Chrysostom did not use the term "domestic church," he stressed that the family's mission is to be a force in society to cultivate the kingdom of God. He expected that raising Christian children would be a priority for parents who took their faith seriously.

Chrysostom explained his expectations for the work of the Christian home this way: "When we teach our children to be gentle, to be forgiving, to be generous, and to love their fellow men...we instill virtue in their souls and reveal the image of God within them."³

Vatican II calls the Christian Family is called a "Domestic Church" in *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*: "In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state."⁴ St. John

² Theresa Doyle-Nelson, "House Churches in the New Testament," St. Anthony Messenger website. <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Jul2008/Feature2.asp>. (accessed August 14, 2011).

³ John Chrysostom, "Homily on Ephesians," in *St. John Chrysostom, On Marriage and Family*, trans. Catherine Roth and David Anderson, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 71.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II, 1964, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Paul II's numerous audiences and apostolic exhortations have guided Catholic teaching in this area.⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church also speaks of the Domestic Church in which "the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way" (CCC 1657).

In the Catholic vision of the family, Christian marriage forms the foundation of the Domestic Church, a sacramental reflection of God's love and a school of prayer, forgiveness, and charity. However, ministry to the family would be severely limited if we narrowly defined the Domestic Church as the married couple and their children. Among couples who have been married in Church and are deeply involved in parish life, there will be some who have not been touched by the joy of the Gospel. Many families are privately experiencing unhappiness, conflict, and even abuse. The ideal of the "Domestic Church" is somewhat like the ideal of the Church Universal as the "Spotless Bride of Christ" (CCC 796). Just as the greater Church struggles to live up to this noble calling, so do families. As the U.S. Bishops said in their pastoral letter, *Follow the Way of Love*, "But remember, a family is holy not because it is perfect but because God's grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew everyday on the way of love."⁶

Recognizing Holiness in All Families

Pope Francis is saying that we can appreciate the potential for holiness in all families without falling into syncretism or compromising our values: "Solidarity, in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity" (EG 228). The U.S. bishops who wrote *Follow the Way of Love* spoke of "the Domestic Church" when describing

⁵ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html

⁶ USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love*, *ibid.*

their own experiences with single parents and family conflict, recognizing God’s saving grace in their families of origin.⁷ We must recognize that family relationships can and do break down and instead of support and encouragement, great pain and suffering are inflicted. Pope Francis calls us to see clearly the situation among families of the world, with all their gifts and struggles, to examine our attitudes and responses to them toward them, and become missionary disciples that walk with those who are suffering and marginalized.

Evangelii Gaudium describes three settings for evangelization, and families are found in all three settings. The first setting is the pastoral situation of those who are active and ardent members of our parish communities, and even those whom we see only occasionally in the pews (EG 15). The second setting for evangelization is “the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism,” who have drifted away from the Church and “no longer experience the consolation born of faith” (EG 15). Cultural pressures affect all families, whatever their current Church practice, because they are “experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds” (EG 66).

The third setting for evangelization described in *Evangelii Gaudium* is made up of people who have never known Christ or have always rejected the faith. Many families would not consider themselves domestic churches, but love one another and want the best for their children. “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation” (EG 259). *Evangelii Gaudium* calls us to respond to the needs of all people who do not

⁷ USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love*, Ibid.

have the joy of the Gospel, to a world that is searching, “sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope” (EG 10). All deserve to hear the joyful message of God’s love.

Families Evangelizing Families

Every parish has a core of active, faithful families who should be encouraged to assist in evangelization. Our ministry efforts in their ongoing formation should be a priority because these lay evangelists will only be effective if they have a personal relationship with Christ. A Christian family that experiences the joy of the Gospel is the best evangelizer of their own children, their neighbors, and their coworkers. They will also have ideas for new ministry and the talents and means to execute them. They may be a small group, but they are the ones who can reach the many other families that are connected to Church marginally, or not at all. They will see their friends and neighbors in the workplace and on the soccer field, and their homes must be places from which good news is communicated (EG 86). Married couples who are living their faith are the best evangelists for Christian marriage; they should serve as sponsors or mentors to engaged and newlywed couples. Service to others in the Church community can radiate to others who have not yet experienced the joy of the Gospel, spreading what Pope Francis calls “a revolution of tenderness” (EG 88).

Christian families who are less active may become more engaged when we invite them to participate in concrete ways that are meaningful to their lives. Rather than bemoan the disconnection of these families, we must be creative in finding opportunities for ministry among them. At the time of births, marriages, and deaths, caring members of the faith community can draw near to families who are otherwise only marginally connected to the parish. By volunteering to assist at these events, lay people can make a difference and evangelize other families. Pastoral ministers should embrace those on the margins and extend the healing ministry of the Church

beyond the regular members, effecting Pope Francis' vision of "the Church is a field hospital where wounds are treated."⁸ Local families can provide assistance for immigrant or unemployed families. Parish leaders could invite business people to facilitate opportunities for service that help stressed families.

The bishops preparing for the upcoming 2015 Synod on the Family echoed Pope Francis' call for a "steady and reassuring" accompaniment of families in challenging life situations, recognizing that God loves them and dwells with them. The 2015 Synod, focusing on "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World," continues the inclusive themes of *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Synod participants are discussing questions of pastoral care for cohabiting couples, the divorced and remarried, homosexual persons, and the children of these diverse families.⁹ When these families approach the Church, Pope Francis encourages us to care for their needs. He says, "Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings" (EG 44).

Understanding Families' Realities

Evangelii Gaudium expresses a deep sensitivity to the challenges people are facing, even in their closest relationships: "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself, if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the "smell of the sheep" and the sheep are willing to hear their voice" (EG 24). The social reality is that

⁸ Tornielli, Andrea, "Antonio Spadaro interviews Francis," Vatican Insider, Sept. 19, 2013 <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/27968/> (accessed March 8, 2015).

⁹ Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly, Lineamenta: "Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World," Vatican City, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html

today is that the two-parent, nuclear family has become less prevalent, and alternative family forms have become more common.¹⁰ The 2007 CARA study, *Marriage in America*, found that Catholics are very similar to the U.S. population as a whole in terms of the demography of marriage, such as marital status, age at first marriage, and having been divorced. Fifty-three percent of adult Catholics (age 18 and older) are currently married, and two-thirds of that group was married in the Church. Five percent are widowed.¹¹ One-quarter of respondents to the CARA study have never been married. They also belong to families, and they have gifts to share with the community. Many single adults need help caring for parents.

Pope Francis observes that marriage tends to be viewed as “a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will” rather than the Catholic definition as a vocation of the spouses “who accept to enter a total communion of life” (EG 66). This cultural shift in marriage has far reaching consequences for the spread of the Gospel. With fewer marrying in church, the connection to the sacramental life continues to weaken. According to the CARA Study, as the number of Catholic marriages has declined, so have the number of infant baptisms. In 1970, there were 23 marriages and 9 baptisms per 1000 Catholics. In 2009, there were 12.7 marriages and 2.7 baptisms per 1000 Catholics.¹²

The Synod on the Family is discussing appropriate pastoral care for families in irregular unions.¹³ Currently, 60 percent of all marriages are preceded by cohabitation, but fewer than half

¹⁰ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2008, *Catholic Marriage in America*, <http://explore.georgetown.edu/news/?ID=31256>

¹¹ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*, (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., October 2007), <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf>

¹² *Nineteen Sixty-four* research blog for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), (Georgetown University, Mark M. Gray, ed.), October 2010, <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2010/08/there-will-likely-be-fewer-catholic.html>

¹³ Synod of Bishops, *LIneamenta*, 2014, no. 37.

of cohabiting unions end in marriage.¹⁴ Many of these relationships include children. Catholic families need to know that it is charitable to be patient with such couples and encourage them to move toward marriage. They should not be shunned or discouraged from participating in the life of the family. Marriage preparation can have a positive impact on these couples. Parishes could hold ritual blessings for engagements. Catholic colleges, campus ministries, and Newman Centers could offer courses in healthy relationships and communication skills.

Among single Catholics who believe they may marry in the future, 72 percent indicate that it is of some importance to them that they be married within the Catholic Church, according to the CARA study.¹⁵ Active parishioners, by modeling loving marriage, could attract these couples to consider marriage. They could include them in parish social events and invite them to participate in outreach to the poor. Diocesan and parish staffs should welcome couples inquiring about weddings with warm and non-judgmental attitude. We need to minimize obstacles to getting married in the Church by limiting fees and unwieldy policies.¹⁶

Twelve percent of Catholics in the CARA study are divorced, and 1 percent are currently separated. Only 15 percent of divorced Catholics have sought an annulment.¹⁷ When they want to be part of our faith community, these families also deserve pastoral care.¹⁸ We must educate Catholics that divorce does not mean excommunication, and hold information sessions about the tribunal process so that more divorced persons will apply for annulments. Dioceses could include married persons in tribunals and involve married persons as advocates. Parishes need to welcome

¹⁴ USCCB, For Your Marriage website, "Cohabitation." <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/catholic-marriage/church-teachings/cohabitation/> (accessed March 6, 2015).

¹⁵ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., October 2007, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf>

¹⁶ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, 2014, no. 40.

¹⁷ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, October 2007, *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Synod of Bishops, *Lineamenta*, 2014, no.54.

civilly-married and remarried couples and their children into parish prayer experiences, faith formation, and service projects.

Single parents may be among the most active parish members, or they may be on the margins of the community. Less than half (46 percent) of U.S. children younger than 18 years of age are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. 34% of children today are living with an unmarried parent—up from just 9% in 1960, and 19% in 1980.¹⁹ The faith community could assist single parents with childcare and material assistance when needed. Single parents and their children should be encouraged to participate in faith formation and preparation for children's sacraments.

About one-quarter of Catholic marriages are mixed-Church or mixed faith. Seventy-two percent of married Catholics have a Catholic spouse. We should assist families in mixed-religion marriages to succeed by providing opportunities to be true leaders of their families in spiritual matters at home. Christian spouses of different faith traditions can learn about the baptismal foundation of their domestic church. Diocesan leaders should promote dialogue among churches and religions, finding common ground around family life and values. Community faith leaders could offer ecumenical prayer services and invite these families to help organize them.²⁰

The Synod on the Family also is also discussing pastoral care for homosexuals and their families.²¹ We should promote prayer and outreach that is inclusive of all persons, whatever their personal issues. Help families to focus on caring for others less fortunate, allowing all family members to work together for the common good. Build loving communities in which all find friendship and meaningful healthy relationships. Parishes should also develop support programs

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, "Less than Half of US Kids Today Live in a Traditional Family," Gretchen Livingston, December 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>

²⁰ Synod of Bishops, Lineamenta, 2014, no. 53.

²¹ Synod of Bishops, no. 50.

for parents of gay children, and same-sex couples and their children should be included in parish life without discrimination. We must work for just and respectful church and civic policies for all minorities.

Challenges for Ministry to Families

Besides marriage issues, the causes of breakdown in faith practice are complex and peoples' motivations are "mysteries which no one can fully know from without" (EG 172). *Evangelii Gaudium* identifies some causes of this breakdown: "a lack of opportunity for dialogue in families, the influence of the communications media, a relativistic subjectivism, unbridled consumerism which feeds the market, lack of pastoral care among the poor, the failure of our institutions to be welcoming, and our difficulty in restoring a mystical adherence to the faith in a pluralistic religious landscape" (EG 70).

The Pope reminds us that responsibility for not following the Church's teachings can be conditioned by ignorance or fear (CCC 1724) (EG 44). A main reason people fail to marry is poverty. While more than half of upper-class (57%) and middle-class (55%) adults are married, only 35% of lower-class adults are married.²² *Evangelii Gaudium* is insistent that we give a preferential option for the poor and seek to include them in the Church (186). Solidarity with the poor includes helping them overcome obstacles to marrying and living fully the Church's sacramental life. For instance, a growing number of parishes are holding group weddings and hosting communal receptions for couples who otherwise could not afford it.

Our church policies and rules may keep people from approaching the sacraments: Couples not registered in any parish are often turned away by well-meaning but uninformed or non-evangelizing parish staff. They may perceive church attendance as too expensive, too many

²² Pew Research Center Trends "Yes, the Rich Are Different," Kim Parker, October 8, 2012, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/27/yes-the-rich-are-different>.

rules, or for “perfect” people. The current fashion in destination weddings has resulted in many couples entering marriage cut off from Church. Pope Francis calls us to ministry in a “missionary key,” which puts people ahead of policies and rules, including the way we treat the sacraments, since “...our church doors should always be open...nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason” (EG 47).

Finding Opportunity in Crisis

What more can ministers do to attract families that are not so closely associated with Church? In *Our Hearts Were Burning: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation*, the U.S. bishops urged us to help parents participate actively in faith formation of their children.²³ Some occasions for meeting these families include children’s sacrament preparation or club activities at the parish. Small faith sharing groups can provide practice at sharing their faith stories, offer companions on the journey, and reinforce them in Christian values. Groups like the Christian Family Movement hold informal gatherings in people’s homes for faith-building conversation and family outreach activities.²⁴

The parish should endeavor to be a place where families meet like-minded friends who are their peers in the vocations of both marriage and parenting and counter the negative cultural trends, like materialism, individualism, and secularism. The “face-to-face encounter with others” of which Pope Francis speaks can be a new experience for people accustomed to private, individual, or infrequent religious practices. We will want to make the most of those times, making them warm experiences of meaningful prayer and hospitality. In *Family Ethics*, Julie Hanlon Rubio recommends that parishes offer opportunities “to bring spouses or families

²³ USCCB, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation*, (Washington, DC: USCCB), 34.

²⁴ Christian Family Movement-USA, www.cfm.org

together to deepen their personal communion or to live out their familial vocation to be disciples of Christ in the world.”²⁵

Pope Francis says that formation for lay people should especially focus on the Word of God (175). *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes* describes catechetical and enrichment programs that include opportunities for young parents to reflect on how to apply the meaning of Scripture and Catholic tradition to daily life as disciples of Jesus Christ. Parents in such programs learn to develop patterns of ritual celebrations at home, and to experience a variety of prayer styles and practice them.²⁶

A Spirituality of Accompaniment

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope dreams of a Church with its arms wide open, like the father of the Prodigal son, where there is a place for others, with all their problems (EG 47). Accompanying families who are not yet perfectly meeting the moral expectations of Christian life will not require abandoning truth or “detracting from the evangelical ideal” (EG 44). The Church, in claiming moral norms for marriage and relationships, is often perceived as opposed to personal freedom, but Pope Francis reminds us that, quite the contrary, we raise these moral norms out of belief in human dignity (EG 65). We are motivated by the positive message of the Gospel -- the love of God who loves us first -- along with the sacredness and beauty of every life (EG 168).

If we keep in mind the whole Gospel message, teaching all the virtues together, we can still proclaim truth of Catholic teaching without excluding those who are not fulfilling it (EG 39).

²⁵ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 200.

²⁶ USCCB, *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2010), 4.

Pope Francis urges us to have a fitting sense of proportion in moral teaching, where all of the virtues are at the service of love. Pope Francis says that, rather than cause confusion, this balanced teaching is essential if it is to be faithful to the Gospel (EG 40). He explains that when we focus on one truth at the expense of others, “the edifice of the Church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options” (EG 39). For example, if we teach the indissolubility of marriage without also teaching that domestic violence has no place in a marriage, we fail to proclaim the Church’s teaching of human dignity in its fullness. The U.S. Bishops sought to clarify this misconception in their pastoral letter against domestic violence, *When I Call for Help*.²⁷

This accompaniment, walking beside families and celebrating their progress, must reflect “a closeness and compassion which, at the same time, heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (EG 169). Catechetical leaders, family ministers, and pastoral workers need to find ways to work together at “showing an immense love for humanity inspired by the God who became man” (EG 76).

Ministering Joyfully

Pope Francis does not let all the challenges in society dampen his joy in the Gospel. He chooses to appreciate the positive elements alive in culture and families today (EG 116). *Evangelii Gaudium* invites us to have faith in families as they make progress, however slowly, and he urges us to celebrate every step people are making toward the good. Even a small step in the midst of “human limitations” is cause for hope and should bring ministers joy. The Pope

²⁷ USCCB, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, 2002, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm>

applauds the popular piety in many cultures and household spirituality that is simple but deep in faith. He points out the humanism and quest for justice among people of diverse faith backgrounds and recognizes how they cooperate for peace. Especially, he counsels us to trust the faithful action of the Spirit to continue to bring good out of dire circumstances (EG 68).

If our experiences with inviting parents or ministers from other disciplines to partner with us have caused us frustration in the past, *Evangelii Gaudium* challenges ministers to improve our relationships with parents as co-missioners for passing on the faith: “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening...is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders” (EG 171). A spirituality of accompaniment requires humility and patience, so *Evangelii Gaudium* invites us to pray with the image of the family ministry of Mother Mary, who was able to turn a stable into a home for Jesus (EG 286).

Jesus is our model for evangelization, and he did not shrink from meeting people where they lived, at various levels of religious observance or moral uprightness. “We see how accessible he is, as he draws near the blind man (cf. Mk 10:46-52) and eats and drinks with sinners (cf. Mk 2:16)” (EG 269). His willingness to accompany people is attractive and motivates us to decide to reach out with joyful hearts to families in the most challenged situations: “Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world” (EG 269).