

***Parents as First Preachers:
Naming Grace in the Domestic Church***

A White Paper for the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership, 2015

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I: The Second Vatican Council document, *Lumen gentium*, gave parents a mandate to serve as “first preachers” in the domestic church.

II: Fifty years later, this mandate has been generally overlooked and largely unrealized. As catechetical leaders, we must rise to the challenge of equipping parents to serve as preachers in the home.

III: There is a method of preaching in the domestic church, mirroring homiletic preaching, which increases familial bonds while drawing members to Christ.

IV: There are several models for preaching in the domestic church, designed to match the characteristics of children.

V: When parents begin to preach confidently in the domestic church, there will be a greater joy in the home as well as a deeper desire to participate in the larger Church.

Introduction

If you remember big bangs and neon fanny packs, you probably recall one of the songs recorded by Madonna that gave parents fits: *Papa Don't Preach*. It would seem many parents heeded Madonna's advice and abdicated their role as preachers in the home for fear of sounding too “preachy.” Most Catholic parents have probably never even considered, much less accepted, the serious undertaking of preaching. The time has come for the Church to take up the challenge of empowering and equipping parents for the beautiful task of preaching the Good News in the home, “the domestic church.”¹

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Pope Francis dedicates a major portion of this dynamic document to proclamation through preaching. In laying out his prophetic vision for the Church, Francis highlights the critical importance of preaching for the entire people of God. “A renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practicing, a new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization.”² Later he writes:

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* [Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964], n. 11.

² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation, *On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, 2013] (Washington, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), n. 11.

“Today, as the Church seeks to experience a profound missionary renewal, there is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility.”³

Pope Francis also expresses great concern for the family, which “is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children.”⁴ Just as pastors utilize the homily as a primary tool for passing on the faith and strengthening bonds with parishioners, when parents take up their ‘daily responsibility’ and effectively preach to their children, faith will be passed on in powerful ways while strengthening the bonds of the family. As parents begin to joyfully herald the Good News in the domestic church, they will spark a “profound missionary renewal in the Church.”⁵

Where do parents receive the right and privilege to serve as preachers in the domestic church? In the Second Vatican Council document *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, [Lumen gentium](#)*, the Bishops state: “The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first *preachers* [emphasis mine] 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.”⁶ Many catechetical leaders have summoned parents to serve as primary educators (*magistri*) of their children: “The right and duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable.”⁷ Yet few realize this critical call for parents to serve as first preachers (*praecones*)⁸ of their children.

In 1981, John Paul II reiterated the Council’s call and further alerted the Church of the need for Christian parents to proclaim the Gospel: “Thus the little domestic Church, like the greater Church, . . . ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. . . the future of evangelization depends in great part on the Church of the home.”⁹ Yet today, fifty years after the Second Vatican Council and thirty plus years after the admonition by John Paul II, the right, responsibility, and privilege of parents to preach within the domestic church remains overlooked and underdeveloped.

For the home to rightfully be called a domestic church, it must contain the constitutive elements of the Church. According to Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*,¹⁰ an essential element is proclamation of the word. “It sees the Church as gathered and formed by the word of God. The mission of the Church is to proclaim what it has heard, believed, and

³ *Evangelli Gaudium*, n. 127.

⁴ *Ibid.* n. 66.

⁵ *Ibid.* n. 127.

⁶ *Lumen gentium*, n. 11.

⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [Apostolic Exhortation, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, 1981] (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), n. 36.

⁸ *Magistri* is the Latin term used for educator in the Second Vatican Council documents, while *praecones* designates a person who acts as a herald.

⁹ *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 51-52.

¹⁰ Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church*, exp. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

been commissioned to proclaim.”¹¹ Dulles names this model, *Herald*, which is one of four dominant images employed for preaching in the Catholic tradition.¹² The preacher as herald proclaims, announces or declares, the Good News of Jesus Christ, and serves as “the very mouthpiece of God.”¹³ For the home to properly serve as a domestic church, parents as ecclesial leaders must herald the Good News to their children.

Who better to preach than parents? Who has a deeper love for their children than parents? “Let us think how many dads and moms every day put their faith into practice by offering up their own lives in a concrete way for the good of the family.”¹⁴ Pope Francis speaks further to the profound influence of the mother: “The mother takes care that her children develop better, that they grow strong, capable of accepting responsibilities, of engaging in life, of striving for great ideas...”¹⁵ Parents desire what is best for their children and will rise to the challenge of preaching, but must be guided in this task. Rather than placing a heavy burden, preaching in the domestic church should be presented as a way of joyfully bringing the absolute best—Jesus—to their children. For children to realize their true identity as children of God and to discover their vocations, parents must claim their role as preachers to their children.

Christian parents have historically assumed the task of passing on the faith through proclamation of the word of God. From the early church, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice’ (2 Tm 1:5).”¹⁶ From the fourth century, we read of Bishop Augustine of Hippo urging heads of Christian households to assume their ecclesial roles. “Take my place in your families. Everyone who is head of a house must exercise the Episcopal office and see to the faith of his people... take care with all watchfulness for the salvation of the household entrusted to you.”¹⁷

By preaching, parents would more fully exercise their position as ecclesial leaders in the domestic church. Though the institutional Church limits homiletic preaching to the ordained, it “recognizes that preaching is not limited to priests... Indeed, the proclamation of the Word of God is the responsibility of the entire Christian community by virtue of the sacrament of Baptism.”¹⁸ While responsibility for preaching lies within the entire community, parents perhaps have the greatest at stake for proclaiming the word

¹¹ Dulles, 68.

¹² Robert P. Waznak, *An Introduction to the Homily* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 31.

¹³ *Ibid.* 32.

¹⁴ *Angelus*, St. Peter’s Square, June 23, 2013.

¹⁵ *Pope Francis and the Family*, (Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), 12.

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 13.

¹⁷ Augustine, “Sermon 94,” *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844-1864, 38:580) cited Bourq, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches*, 10.

¹⁸ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly*, 18th printing. (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2005), 1.

of God—the salvation of their children, the happiness of their home, the growth of the Church, and the creation of “a better world.”¹⁹

According to Christian Smith, professor of sociology and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame,²⁰ “...teenagers are far more inclined to be strongly religious later in life when their parents are strongly religious during their formative years.”²¹ Smith reports that more than youth groups, mission trips, religious education, and other adults, “the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”²² Yet, parents must speak their faith. “It doesn't register that faith is supposed to make you live differently unless parents help their kids connect the dots.”²³

Who better to speak, to proclaim, the faith than parents? No one. “Parents are the primary faith influencers in their children’s lives by design. To equip the generations effectively, we must reach and equip parents.”²⁴ Should parents preach without proper training? Pope Francis says, “yes.” Even when not fully equipped, we should not “postpone the evangelizing mission; rather, each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are.”²⁵ We can begin here and now by “announcing that God is love and only love.”²⁶ But Pope Francis insists: “We want to have better training, a deepening love and a clearer witness to the Gospel.”²⁷ We believe this is true for parents. To be effective, parents must be confident when preaching to their children.

Proposal

This paper is a call for catechetical leaders, at service of the Christian family,²⁸ to awaken and inspire parents to assume their role as first preachers to their children and to adequately equip parents to carry out this vital ministry. Indispensable to this worthy goal is providing parents with a preaching method that is effective with children. Parents will also need a new understanding of preaching the Gospel.

As theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert stressed when assessing the current state of preaching in her seminal work, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, “[O]ne factor contributing to the blocking of the Gospel in our day is precisely our misunderstanding of where the word of God is located and who are the

¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 183.

²⁰ http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/assets/102508/family_religious_involvement_and_the_quality_of_parental_relationships_for_families_with_early_adolescents.pdf

²¹ <http://ghctfamilyfaithathome.blogspot.com/2014/10/why-parents-matter.html>

²² Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.

²³ *More Teens Becoming Fake Christians:*

<http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/08/27/almost.christian/index.html>

²⁴ Brian Haynes. *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), 35.

²⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 121.

²⁶ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1955), 55.

²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 121.

²⁸ *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 1.

preachers of the good news.”²⁹ This paper proposes the word of God resides in the ordinary daily events of life; an entire group of preachers, parents, has been largely ignored and rarely trained; parents effectively bring the beauty of the Gospel to their children, not by being “preachy,” but by joyfully *Naming Grace*.

Preaching, whether in the grandest cathedral or the most humble home, is always the work of the Holy Spirit compelling pastors and parents to proclaim “God’s wonderful works.”³⁰ It is our hope and prayer that when parents hear the call to preach, their hearts will be “so touched by this invitation that proclamation, heralded speech, and glad tidings must be told.”³¹

Parent as Preacher

To *Name Grace* effectively, the parent, like the pastor, must exhibit certain qualities. Interestingly, Pope Francis uses motherhood as the model for good preachers. “It reminds us that the Church is a mother, and that she preaches in the same way that a mother speaks to her child, knowing that what she is teaching is for his or her benefit, for children know that they are loved. Moreover, a good mother can recognize everything that God is bringing about in her children, she listens to their concerns and learns from them.”³²

The parent as preacher “accompanies”³³ the child with love, “seeing beyond [his or her] weaknesses and failures.”³⁴ The parent knows the child’s “heart,”³⁵ “keeps his ear to [the child] to discover what it is that [the child] needs to hear.”³⁶ The parent prays and seeks holiness. The parent as preacher reads and reflects on Scripture, with a “reverence for the truth.”³⁷ The preacher must be a joy-filled, authentic witness. In today’s world, there is a “‘thirst for authenticity’ and ‘call for evangelizers to speak of a God whom they themselves know and are familiar with, as if they were seeing him.’”³⁸ Faith, hope, and love must remain with the parent who wishes to joyfully preach the Good News!

Preaching as Naming Grace in the Domestic Church

When developing the most efficacious method for equipping parents to preach, we turn to the best of homiletics. As a mother studying preaching, I was especially struck by Mary Catherine Hilkert’s *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. Her theology, practices, and ideas on preaching resonated with my experiences of proclaiming God’s wonderful works in my own domestic church. Preaching as *Naming*

²⁹ Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 14.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963], n. 35.

³¹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 35.

³² *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 139.

³³ *Ibid.* n. 169.

³⁴ *Ibid.* n. 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.* n. 137.

³⁶ *Ibid.* n. 154.

³⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), no. 78: AAS 68 (1976), 71.

³⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 150.

Grace makes preaching accessible to parents and strengthens the home as parents recognize their family “is holy not because it is perfect but because God’s *grace* [emphasis mine] is at work in it, helping it to set out anew every day on the way of love.”³⁹

Hilkert expounds on Karl Rahner’s theology on grace as God’s self-communicating love, grounded in the Incarnation. Rahner describes grace as “experienced grace,” with experience as the point of contact with the transcendent. *Naming Grace* identifies and names God’s presence—moments of peace, love, forgiveness, healing, joy—in the human experience. *Naming Grace* aligns with the Catholic sacramental principle “that grace is made present by being expressed.”⁴⁰ The more we name grace—God’s loving presence—in the Christian home, the more abundant God’s love will reign in the home.

Naming grace requires a sacramental imagination, which is a way of interpreting the experiences of life through the lens of faith. Open eyes permit the heart to see the world more enchantingly—“against an infinite horizon.”⁴¹ Yet preaching as *Naming Grace* also acknowledges and confronts the dis-grace of the world (violence, hate, poverty, discrimination, in justice) and the seeming lack of God’s presence, which children experience as loneliness, bullying, sickness, etc. “Only ‘the eyes of faith’ sees God’s presence in a world that often stands ‘in contrast’ to the promise that God is ‘God of the living.’”⁴²

The Method of Naming Grace in the Domestic Church

Naming Grace in the Domestic Church (Naming Grace) can best be described as a Theological, Relational Method. In this method, preaching in the home mirrors the homily as “a scriptural interpretation of human existence which enables a community (the family) to recognize God’s active presence (grace), to respond to that presence in faith through liturgical word and gesture (praise, thanksgiving, worship) and beyond the liturgical assembly, through a life lived in conformity with the Gospel.”⁴³

For this paper, the method and models focus on preaching to the young child, knowing “young children think deeply about God.”⁴⁴ The term, “preaching event,” describes both preaching in the home as well as the Sunday homily, and [preaching event] will replace “homily.”

Theological: The substance of preaching, whether by pastor or parent, necessarily remains grounded in theology. Though parents may at first be intimidated, we can provide them with a new understanding of theology and theologian. “The Christian

³⁹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Follow the Way of Love*, (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) 9.

⁴⁰ Michael J. Himes, “This Graced World: Trinity, Grace & Sacraments,” *Church* (Spring 1985), 11.

⁴¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *Against an Infinite Horizon: the Finger of God in our Everyday Lives* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), 95.

⁴² Hilkert, 36-37.

⁴³ *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 29.

⁴⁴ Catherine Stonehouse. *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baer Publishing Group, 1998), 133.

leaders of the future have to be theologians, *persons who know the heart of God* [emphasis mine] and are trained—through prayer, study, and careful analysis—to manifest the divine event of God’s saving work in the midst of many seemingly random events of their time.”⁴⁵

Relational: The method is relational as the preaching event draws the child into a close relationship with Jesus, as well as deepening the relationship between parent and child. In a study on children’s spirituality, the researchers claim the child’s desire for relationship embodies the child’s spirituality.⁴⁶ Another study reported “positive connections between parents’ religiosity and high parental warmth (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000), and closer parent-child relationship (Dollahite et al, 2004; Mahoney et al, 2001).⁴⁷

Preaching the Great Realities: *Naming Grace* cuts to the chase and preaches the great realities. “The younger the child the more capable he is of receiving great things and the child is satisfied only with great and essential things.”⁴⁸ Preaching the essentials centers on the kerygma, with early childhood as “a privileged age for accepting the kerygma.”⁴⁹ Pope Francis reminds us “to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing.”⁵⁰ He later writes of the kerygma: “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.”⁵¹

Regards Experience as the Point of Contact: For preaching to be relevant, experience must serve as a point of contact, “an experience, which cries out for the light of God’s word.”⁵² The experience must contain a “depth dimension,”⁵³ in order “to touch the deepest levels of the human heart and address the real questions of human experience.”⁵⁴ “In this effort we may need but think of some ordinary human experience such as a joyful reunion, a moment of disappointment, the fear of being alone, compassion at the sufferings of others, uncertainty about the future, concern for a loved one, and so forth.”⁵⁵

Interprets the Experience in the Light of Scripture: “The first step, after calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, is to give our entire attention to the biblical text, which needs to

⁴⁵ Houwen, 66-67.

⁴⁶ *Nurturing Christian Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugen, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 10.

⁴⁷ *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, eds. Eugene Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagener, Peter Benson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 298.

⁴⁸ Cavalletti, 283.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁵⁰ *Evangelii Gadium*, n. 35.

⁵¹ Ibid. n. 164.

⁵² Ibid. n. 154.

⁵³ Hilkert, 49.

⁵⁴ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 15.

⁵⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 154.

be the basis of our preaching.”⁵⁶ All “preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture.”⁵⁷ Yet we do not so much explain the Scripture, as we “interpret the human situation through the Scriptures.”⁵⁸ “What we are looking for is ‘what the Lord has to say in this or that particular circumstance.’”⁵⁹

Discovers One Pearl: After study, prayer, and discernment the parent as preacher focuses on one message—a single jewel that leads to understanding of a great reality. “A pearl is something worth listening to. . . [it] simply conveys a profound truth in a way that we all realize it with a clarity we didn’t before.”⁶⁰ The parent as preacher will seek images to impart the pearl to the child. “An attractive image makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical and related to everyday life.”⁶¹

Facilitates a Personal Encounter: “The [preaching event] can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God’s word, a constant source of renewal and growth.”⁶² The goal of each preaching event remains a personal encounter with God. Pope Francis reminds us: “Preaching is not so much talking about God as it is a personal encounter among God, the congregation (the child) and the preacher.”⁶³ In receiving the word of God, the child experiences an encounter that fulfills the child’s deep desire for truth and love. We respond to the child’s silent request, “Help me to come closer to God by myself.”⁶⁴

Conversational: The preacher mediates “a dialogue between God and his people.”⁶⁵ “*Good preaching*, in fact, is *never* merely a monologue. It is, instead, an artfully orchestrated *sacred conversation*.”⁶⁶ Preaching as *Naming Grace* necessarily requires conversation as the preaching event remains open to, and at times, guided by the comments and questions of the child. Conversation is natural for preaching in the domestic church, as “[t]he spirit of love which reigns in the family guides both mother and child in their conversations; therein they teach and learn, experience correction and grow in appreciation of what is good.”⁶⁷ The preacher employs “familiar, conversation language.”⁶⁸

⁵⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 146.

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, November 18, 1965], n. 21.

⁵⁸ *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 20.

⁵⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 154.

⁶⁰ Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 43.

⁶¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 157.

⁶² *Ibid.* n. 135.

⁶³ Daniel E. Harris, *We Speak the Word of the Lord: A Practical Plan for More Effective Preaching* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2001), 19.

⁶⁴ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*, trans. Patricia A. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 45.

⁶⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (May 31, 1998), no. 41: AAS90 (1998), 738-739.

⁶⁶ *Preaching as the Art of Sacred Conversation: Sermons that Work VI*, ed. Roger Alling and David J. Schlafer (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1997), viii.

⁶⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 139.

⁶⁸ Harris, 17.

Facilitates Meaning: “People are hungry, sometimes desperately so, for meaning in their lives.”⁶⁹ Children deal with issues of fear, loss, failure, frustration, suffering, love, life, and death. Preachers serve as “mediators of meaning”⁷⁰ by interpreting these pivotal experiences through the lens of faith. They will resist forcing meaning upon the child, but will assist the child to “welcome the meaning of life.”⁷¹ “All preaching ... is really a function of letting God’s voice become the smiling, beckoning, caressing, cajoling, luring mother, calling the child out of fear, darkness, chaos, and inarticulateness to freedom, thought, deep feeling, self-expression, and love.”⁷²

Brings Hope: “Ultimately the Lord’s Paschal Mystery becomes the basis of all preaching.”⁷³ Preaching as *Naming Grace* sheds light, and brings hope, to even the darkest experiences. Preaching assures the child that no matter how hurt, sad, or discouraged, “all things work for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). The parent never leaves the child without hope, but with prophetic words helps the child to create new possibilities. “Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity.”⁷⁴

Leads to Worship and Mission: After reflecting on God’s love, preaching as *Naming Grace* leads to worship and mission. Worship in the domestic church may be simple praise or a beloved ritual. “Thank you, Jesus.” “We love you, Jesus.” “Help us, Jesus.” The preaching event also leads to mission. “Our encounter with Jesus inevitably leads to mission; our love for Jesus translates into our love for others. This is why the [preaching event], which participates in the power of Christ’s word, ought to inspire a sense of mission for those who hear it, making them doers and proclaimers of that same word in the world. A [preaching event] that does not lead to mission is, therefore, incomplete.”⁷⁵

Models of Naming Grace in the Domestic Church

We have identified three models of preaching as *Naming Grace*, each containing the necessary elements of effective preaching contained in the Theological, Relational Method, and each meeting the criteria set by Hilkert: “(1) the experience to be named is human experience in its depth dimension; (2) in the contemporary world situation, most people’s experience of God is in the face, and in spite of, human suffering; and (3) the interpretative keys to identifying grace in human experience are located in the biblical story and the basic symbols of the Christian tradition.”⁷⁶ All three models lead to conversion, while helping the child to discern meaning in life as a beloved child of God.

⁶⁹ *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷¹ *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: Essential Realities*, ed. Tina Lillig (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2004), 28.

⁷² Rolheiser, 209.

⁷³ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 9.

⁷⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 169.

⁷⁵ *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, 18.

⁷⁶ Hilkert, 49.

All three models take into account the characteristics of the young child.⁷⁷ All three rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A. Naming Grace as Spontaneous Praise

The first model, *Spontaneous Praise as Naming Grace*, brings the preacher and child to a spontaneous praise for the goodness, beauty, and love of God. The preacher, simply and spontaneously, recognizes and names the presence or seeming absence of God in the moment. Parents in the domestic church will take the lead in this model of preaching, but will often be pleasantly surprised when their own children participate in “proclaiming God’s wonderful works.”⁷⁸

Spontaneous Praise can be as effortless as declaring, “This is a glorious day! Thank you, God, for creating our beautiful world and help us to take care of the world.” The parent preaches when spontaneously reminding the child of his or her true identity. “You are such a gift from God! *Spontaneous Praise* leads the child to discipleship: “Freddy, it was so kind of you to help Gemma after she fell. You were like Jesus, who helped the sick or hurting.”

Opportunities abound for parents as preachers to name grace in the simplest, most spontaneous ways throughout the day. Though simple, the model contains all the necessary elements of effective preaching.

Naming Grace as Spontaneous Praise proceeds through the following steps:

1. Recognizes God’s presence or apparent absence in the experience of the moment.
2. Draws the child into the moment by expressing wonder, thanksgiving, compassion, love, joy, sorrow, etc.
3. *Names Grace*.
4. Spontaneously praises God and takes action.

B. Naming Grace as Sacred Reflection

Sacred Reflection takes its shape from theological reflection. “Theological reflection is a way of doing theology that starts from the experience of life and leads to searching in faith, for deeper meaning, and for the living God.”⁷⁹ The experience must contain a “depth dimension,”⁸⁰ an experience that points to the presence of God or the apparent absence of God. Parents as first preachers reflect on the child’s experience to lead “into that larger world of meaning.”⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ann Garrido, *Mustard Seed Preaching* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), 11. Children are: small; drawn toward the essentials; oriented to reality; filled with awe and wonder; have a deep desire and capacity for love; possess absorbent minds; learn best through repetitive work of their hands.

⁷⁸ *Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 1.

⁷⁹ Kathleen McAplin, *Ministry that Transforms: A Contemplative Process of Theological Reflection* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 7.

⁸⁰ Hilkert, 49.

⁸¹ Robert L. Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 2-4.

Sacred Reflection begins with an accurate description of the experience, and then asks critical questions for deeper and richer meaning. This search for theological meaning continues by recalling scriptural texts, personal and communal stories, as well as historical events. Utilizing the sacramental imagination, the preacher expands the way we view the experience. Because every experience holds multiple meanings, the preacher must determine exactly which meaning to convey. Parents as first preachers apply the appropriate meaning to the situation, enabling the child to glimpse a new reality or to create a new possibility—inner peace or joy, a thirst for justice, or increased charity.”⁸²

Preaching as *Sacred Reflection* may occur with an event as traumatic as the death of a loved one or as ordinary as a fight between siblings. A child eventually forms meaning through a series of experiences and grows in faith as the parent gently and wisely guides the child in interpreting these experiences through the Scripture.

Naming Grace as Sacred Reflection proceeds through the following steps:

1. Chooses an experience that is particular, current, personal, and meaningful.
2. Gathers an accurate description of the experience.
3. Searches for the theological meaning of the experience.
4. Interprets the experience in the light of the story of Jesus.
5. Decides on the one pearl to convey.
6. Anticipates questions.
7. Engages the child in meaningful conversation.
8. *Names Grace*.
9. Leads the child in worship and action.

C. Naming Grace as Scriptural Exploration

Scriptural Exploration most resembles preaching from the pulpit as it begins with a scriptural text. The parent may follow the Lectionary or choose a specific story of Jesus to emphasize the trusting, loving relationship found with Jesus. As a preacher, the parent begins with exegesis of the text. Exegesis, Greek for interpretation, may seem overwhelming for busy parents. However, though demanding some time, the process need not be daunting. “In general, exegesis is the time for us to ask questions of the text, put on our detective eyewear, and let the conversation with the text begin.”⁸³

With the initial reading, the parent surfaces questions and observations of the text. The parent then engages the sacramental imagination to see the text through the child’s eyes. Next, the parent searches for insights by reading commentaries and reflections. The parent will then enter the depths of Scripture through *lectio divina*. “It consists of reading God’s word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us.”⁸⁴

⁸² Kinast, 149.

⁸³ Jennifer Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 33.

⁸⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 152.

The parent is now ready to discover new meaning by “playing with the text.”⁸⁵ Imaginative play breathes new life into the setting, the landscape, and the characters of the text, giving freshness to a well-known or overused text. Several overarching questions should pervade the process: Where does grace present itself in the text? Which passage from the text could have the greatest impact on the child? What line or phrase draws the child into a deeper relationship with Jesus? What image could connect with the child? What in the child’s experience will help make sense of the text?

The parent is ready to draft a reflection, based on the one pearl that is image-driven. Once the pearl for *Naming Grace* is polished, critical questions are designed to initiate conversation. Finally, the parent as preacher envisions the unfolding of the preaching event: the environment, the proclamation, reflection, conversation, silence, possible activity, and prayer—all to bring the child closer to Jesus.

Naming Grace as Scriptural Exploration proceeds through the following steps:

1. Chooses a Scriptural text.
2. Reads carefully and asks questions of the text.
3. Explores the text through a child’s eyes.
4. Reads the commentaries or reflections.
5. Prays with the text through *Lectio divina*.
6. Plays with the text through his/her imagination.
7. Decides on the one pearl.
8. Explores the child’s experiences for a point of contact.
9. Writes the proclamation in a few words.
10. Anticipates questions to stimulate conversation.
11. Creates a “hands-on” activity to reinforce the preaching.
12. Sets the environment.
13. *Names Grace*.
14. Leads the child in worship and mission.

Conclusion

The time is now! “There is no other choice than to go to the family's aid and give them personal help.”⁸⁶ Pope Francis has charged the Church with the task of aiding parents. While challenging, empowering parents to preach creates exciting possibilities for making disciples and passing on the faith to the next generation. In doing so, we also elevate the status of parents as ecclesial leaders in the domestic church.

Parents, though, cannot do it alone. Nor should they. “Your domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united and supported by parishes and other communities within the larger Church.”⁸⁷ When the larger Church fully supports the domestic church, the domestic church, in turn, will greatly enrich the larger Church. As

⁸⁵ Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal Pastoral Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 11-42.

⁸⁶ <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1404421.htm>

⁸⁷ *Follow the Way of Love*, 8.

parents and children together grow in their faith, they will also experience a deeper thirst for the Eucharist and a greater desire for the Eucharistic community.

Preaching includes reading the stories of Jesus, but it is more. Preaching involves conversation, but it is more. Preaching leads to prayer, but it is more. Preaching is the art of weaving our stories with God's stories. Preaching is the craft of making meaning by interpreting "the situation through the Scriptures."⁸⁸ Preaching is an encounter with the living God, which converts the human heart. Preaching leads to discipleship and the discovery of identity and vocation. Preaching brings joy to "the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus."⁸⁹ For both parents and children, preaching the Gospel in the domestic church offers "the chance to live life on a higher plane ... leading to authentic personal fulfillment."⁹⁰

Nothing—no activity, good cause, earthly endeavor—could be as worthy as equipping parents to preach in the domestic church. Nothing could be as joyful as parents preaching to their children; *how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news* (Rom 10:13-16)! And, woe to us if we fail to help our parents to preach the Gospel. Parents, become who you are:⁹¹ first preachers in the domestic church! *Parents Do Preach!*

Biography

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⁸⁸ *Fulfilled In Your Hearing*, 20.

⁸⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* n. 10.

⁹¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 17.