

## The New Evangelization: Involving Families, the Domestic Church

David M. Thomas

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Scene one: Imagine a typical Catholic parish, gathered on Sunday morning for what is informally called “the family Mass.” Sprinkled throughout the congregation are various clusters of families, small and large, tall and short. An anxious mom cradles a small infant in a blue blanket. Her face resembles that of an alarm clock, hoping that the Mass ends before her little treasure awakens everyone within crying distance. A teenager stretches to see whether the cute kid seen last week came today. A family of six is bookended by a mom and dad who keep constant vigilance, watching for any nefarious hand movement of their kids. From experience they know that a pinch or a poke can happen faster than a speeding bullet. And what better place than in church. A single person looks worried. She’s there to pray for her ailing mom. A grandpa slightly smiling sits as close as he can to his only granddaughter whose parents were too busy to bring her to Mass. Behold our Catholic families.

The vested pastor quietly awaits in the entrance space. He tries to mimic the way he imagines God looks upon his flock. He seeks to be warm and inviting although at this moment he’s thinking more about those whom he thinks *should* be there rather than those who are. He’s a good pastor, but his constant effort to be so shows on the wrinkles that are all too evident around his eyes. He’s not that old either. But he’s tired. Still, he sucks it up and brightly follows the reader and acolytes up the center aisle to celebrate and give thanks for God’s great gift of life. He loves these families.

Recently, his diocese has been focused on the issue of evangelization and the family. Attention to families has been stimulated by Pope Francis calling for two synod meetings on the family. One had already taken place amid reports of some fairly heated (but respectful) debates among the small group of bishops and others who attended that meeting. Various processes are now going on in the worldwide church to add to the synod discussion that is scheduled for later in the year. The pastor knows that family life is a major concern of the pope, a concern he shares.

He's old enough to remember what Pope Paul VI wrote about evangelization right after he was ordained. He considered the vision of that document one of the church's great writings of priestly lifetime. More than once he's pondered its message and has referred to it often during homilies over the years. He often thought about the pope mentioning in that document that in the family one can find "the various aspects of the entire church." (*On Evangelization in the Modern World --Evangelii Nuntiandi, 71*) He wonders what "aspects" the pope is referring to. All that comes to his mind this morning as he enters into the body of the church where are gathered "his" families.

From his own faith experience, he knows that he owes much of his own faith to his parents. He can't really say that his family was particularly religious, but there was something that was passed on to him by them, a deep sense of God and the goodness of life. One of these days, he wants to reflect more deeply on his early days. As he ages, this desire to recall his past grows stronger. He has often wondered what it is in family life that's part of the graced life of the church and this process of evangelization. Because if he knew it more clearly, he could add it to his list of good things he must preach about.

Scene two: I walked down the supermarket aisle where greeting cards were featured in early February. It was as if someone had spray painted the whole area bright red. Images of hearts were everywhere. I saw an elderly man (like me) trying to select the exact card that would express the perfect message for his valentine. He could have been thinking of his wife or perhaps a favorite child or grandchild. He seemed tense and quite serious. This was not an easy decision for him. Finally, I heard him make a deep sigh and drop his head. He slowly walked away *without having chosen a card*. I was tempted to say a word to him but thought better. He was likely struggling with one of the most complex and deep realities of his life, the matter of love.

What follows is a reflection on the church, the family (the domestic church) and their connection with each other, both institutions facing major challenges of survival in our time. Pope Francis has stirred the waters of this concern by awakening everyone, both inside and outside church membership, about how to live and how to relate to others in this complex era. It's really about love in our time, authentic Christian love. And it is not a simple time. Ask the parish priest

who worries about his flock and the families who are and who are not in attendance that Sunday. Ask the elderly man who can't decide how exactly to express what's in him to someone he deeply cares about.

### The pastoral concern for family

As a people, we can be quite ambivalent in matters of the heart, especially when it come to the experience of intimacy, commitment and long-term relationships. While the dictionary definition of intimacy brings to mind words like closeness, warmth and love, our culture seems bent at times on reducing intimacy to casual sexual encounters and that horribly reduced form of interpersonal engagement, hooking up. Adding to this confusion is the growing influence of what is called social media, the explosion of processes and activities generated by the omnipresent laptops and cell phones offering tools for connecting with others, both near and far. But do these modern wonders bring us closer together? Or do they make us more estranged from each other because we try to package our communication, loving or not, into a few cryptic words of a text?

And how do all the complexities of love and contemporary ways play out in family life? The family is commonly described as the foundation of society and occasionally the same words are used to point out its place in church life. But the family now sits right in the middle of all the cultural turmoil of the postmodern world. And what can done by the church on a practical level to assist families survive as they face the horrific challenges of life today? How can the church help?

In speaking to the bishops of Brazil at the World Youth Day gathering last July, Pope Francis noted that the family is “the essential cell of society and the church.” And we know from biological science that the cell is the fundamental element of all living things. Its health is basic to survival.

This matter of survival is on the mind of Pope Francis and, I would add, a host of other church leaders who deep down know and agree with St. John Paul II who stated that “the future of the world and of the church passes through the family.” (*On the Family - Familiaris Consortio*, 75) Will there be a future for the Church? Part of the answer will come from what happens in families and in the church, which is there to support their lives. And when I mention church, I should focus on parish life for it's in that nexus that the family and church most often connect.

These questions bring us to a consideration of an extremely important conversation that is now taking place in the church. The cause of this dialogue is particularly due to Pope Francis who early on in his remarkable pontificate decided to hold two synod meetings on the topic of family.

This move surprised me because we already had a synod on family in 1980. I know because I was there as a theological advisor to our own bishops' delegation. I also know that never before in the brief history of post-Vatican II synods has there been a repeat of synod topics, much less *two* additional ones. The topic of family must be close to the heart of Pope Francis.

In his pastoral wisdom he knows that family life is a foundational element in the New Evangelization that had been initiated by his predecessors. What follows here is a reflection on a few key aspects of this timely ecclesial discussion, which is not only to be done by the assembled delegates in synod but also by the whole church. Everyone is invited to be a part of this conversation.

The experience of loving in the family can be truly heart-warming. But it can also be soul-shattering. Or a mix of both. Genuine interpersonal love is as central to a life well-lived as is any other imaginable experience. We are created and nurtured by God to be creatures capable of experiencing intimacy and forming community. That includes both our relationship to God and to each other. The two great commandments are inseparable. In his exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, which will be our primary source of insight for what follows, Pope Francis wrote, "How good it does to love one another, in spite of everything! Yes, in spite of everything!" (*EG*, 101)

Which brings us back to that elderly gentleman seeking the right Valentine card for his beloved. The key image of this day is the heart, which our Scriptures describe as the central life-force within us. From the science of biology we also learn that the heart is a wonderfully complex muscle that pumps life-giving nourishment to every one of the billions of cells that make up our bodies. Thus the heart is a fitting symbol for expressing human love, dedication and devotion to others in our lives. When we give our heart, we give ourselves.

## Evangelization begins with awareness

At the beginning of his apostolic exhortation on the new evangelization, Pope Francis quotes words he himself might have penned for the bishops of Latin America. “Life grows by being given away and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.” (*EG*, 10)

Themes like leaving our comfort zone, going out to the margins of society, conversing or dialoging with everyone and serving the poor are already understood as central to the pontificate of Pope Francis. He himself not only addresses these themes in speaking and writing, he consistently does these things himself.

Recently he left the confines of the Vatican to visit a Roman parish for a scheduled Mass. He was also to hear confessions. (Imagine going to confession to him!) His driver likely wondered whether there will be a detour along the way. There was. It was a totally unscheduled stop at a refugee settlement on the way to the parish. No one saw this coming. And, of course, the people living there were delighted.

They came out of their makeshift homes to get close to him, to touch and be touched. He was a man on a mission, a missionary, as he likes to think of himself and as he wants *all the members of the church* to think of themselves. Go out to “find God in every human being” (*EG*, 92) Connect with everyone. Note his description of such actions on his part. He was not so much bringing God to them, but rather he was connecting with God who was already there!

Such is the orientation and vision he presents in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Wherever we are, at home, in the neighborhood, at work or anywhere, we are in a place already touched by God’s love. God’s presence is there. Of course, how many of us are truly aware of that? Or even believe it? Yet that’s part of the work of evangelization, to bring to the surface, to make known the sacredness of this world and with a family perspective, apply this same vision to family life.

Today it is clear that the family is a worldly community, encultured in secularity, and oftentimes a quite messy place both literally and relationally. To say to

families at Sunday Mass that their home life if holy and sacred might cause a wry smile on a parent who knows that at that very moment the sink is full of dirty dishes, the clothes hamper is spilling over with unwashed clothes and the dog just made a mess on the living room floor. Further, utter chaos reigned during those hurried moments just before all the kids were rounded up to drive to the 10 o'clock Mass. The parent might think that yes, some families might be holy, but not mine!

How would Francis respond to her? Perhaps with a knowing smile and then talk about how his mother with her five children was often pushed to the edge. Especially by him.

That's the first aspect of evangelization that can be a part of the message of Francis. We can call it "the challenge of *awareness*." Find God in all things, in all places and among all people. To do this you have to in some way leave yourself, your own worries and self-interests and connect with others. This vision of God's presence also arises from the pope's Ignatian roots. The final meditation of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius is to encourage a search for God in all things. Of course, that's not just for Jesuits to do. It's for everyone. And hopefully, God will be found in all the complexities of family life, which I might add, is not always easy.

Part of the mission of evangelization is to help people see more clearly, to see more of what is, even the presence of God's Spirit renewing us day after day. No one familiar with what the church has been teaching for the last fifty years would deny that God is present in family. And in the ordinary activities of its daily life. Recall the words of St. John Paul II to families. "In and through the events, problems, difficulties and circumstances of everyday life, God comes to them [families], revealing and presenting the concrete 'demands' of their sharing in the love of Christ for his church in the particular family, social and ecclesial situation in which they find themselves." (*FC, 51*)

A strong incarnational or sacramental sensitivity underlies the pope's words. It is rooted in the identity of the family as the domestic church. So a primary task when connecting evangelization and family is to remind families of their inherent sacredness. Help them gain an awareness of who they already are. As St. John Paul II succinctly states, "Family, become what you are." (*FC, 17*)

## A welcoming attitude

The New Evangelizations urges all of us to enter “the land of other” or to open the door to allow others entrance into our lives and into our church. But once we come to that point, the church is faced with the challenge of how best to receive them. The issue involves both the church and its families. What is the appropriate manner of greeting? In general terms, what disposition is proper in such encounters? Again, we can turn to Pope Francis for inspiration. “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.” (*EG, 114*)

As his words penetrate our consciousness, we can also see why certain issues were debated at the first of the two synods called by the pope. Yes, the Church can open its doors to everyone. But once inside, does everyone, especially those estranged, feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged? Are they enveloped by a sense of God’s merciful love? Here is not the place to answer this. But it is the question that Francis is putting to the church’s leadership and all its members. Most will agree that at times the church is not welcoming to all who may enter its precincts. In fact, many don’t even go to church because they assume (correctly or not) that their presence is not welcome. They feel uninvited.

Let’s think about this aspect of evangelization with a family perspective. When outsiders enter our family homes, what actions often follow? The sharing of food and drink. A space is made at the family table should a meal be in progress. In a sense, visitors are made part of the family while they are there. It’s called hospitality, a virtue described so generously in *The Rule of Benedict* as well as witnessed in the way Pope Francis meets everyone. And that includes even those who would be considered “outside the church.”

Also a part of Christian hospitality is the process of “getting to know” the guest. Open dialogue is needed. In fact, Francis considers dialogue an important -- even essential -- aspect of the missionary task. In all areas of life, the pope invites the whole church to create “a culture of dialogue.” To engage in authentic

evangelization, the church and its “missionaries” are called to leave the narrowness of their privatized and comfortable life and grow more close to the lives of others and “to discover that this is itself a source of great joy.” (EG, 268). So an added dimension to dialogue with others, even the stranger, is that we be joyful about these encounters. Clearly a smiling Pope Francis is.

This “going out” is essential to the missionary orientation that Francis calls for in the church. But there is also a message there for families, the domestic expression of the church. Because just as individuals can be all wrapped up in themselves, so can families have that same kind of inwardness. Families can be self-absorbed, protective and more concerned about their own comfort and happiness than the lives of others. Families can build walls of protection around themselves.

We might also describe the challenge of Pope Francis as a call for conversion, a conversion of attitude, an attitude of welcoming hospitality that will affect *everything* that the church does.

For Catholic parishes with a vital sense of evangelization, the parish knows that evangelization is not just a program, a committee or a set of leaflets in the back of the church. It’s an essential part of the *total* life of the parish, thus the current phrase, *evangelizing parish*. In that sense, the parish evangelizes by everything that it does: in its sacramental celebrations, in its ministerial outreach and in its catechetical endeavors. And don’t forget coffee and donuts after Mass. All the activities of the parish are to communicate the Good News of our faith by word and by witness, the two foundational aspects of effective evangelization as outlined by papal teaching going back to Pope Paul VI.

And many parishes do a very good job at this. Consciousness of this need to evangelize is in the smiling faces of those designated as greeters, in the vibrant way the Word is proclaimed during Mass and in the welcoming attitude of all those gathered. Granted, most everything could be better, but there is a genuine attempt on the part of parishes to be places where evangelization happens. No longer is this concept just for the Bible church up the street. It’s part of the life of the Catholic parish as well.

And there remains the matter of how all this evangelization effort connects with families. Certainly part of this is how the parish itself welcomes and involves *all*

families, all sizes and structures, all religious orientations. To improve its effort in this regard, parishes might do an examination of conscience asking, for instance, is there awareness and appropriate accommodation for single parent families whose time and energy might be highly limited? What about families of mixed faith or religion? Are they explicitly made to feel welcome? Are non-Catholic parents made to feel welcome and valued by the parish? Are *all* family members, regardless of their formal relation to the parish, given a place at the table?

Allow me a small personal example. I was once part of the catechetical team of a parish that prepared the young for the reception of First Reconciliation and First Communion. We wanted to involve the whole family of the young person receiving these sacraments in this catechetical process. So we offered preparation sessions for these sacraments that, as much as was possible (a huge matter on its own) would involve the whole family. As a minimum, we asked that at least one parent be present at every session of our sacramental preparation program. Ideally, the whole family would participate, parents and sibs.

We showed that we really cared about their presence by having parents sign in each evening session and if they were missing, a friendly reminder was given by phone. (Emailing was in its infancy, otherwise we might have used that too). Our message was that we (as catechists) valued their presence very much. Sometimes we had to settle for a grandparent but we let it be known that this was quite acceptable – and in its own way, wonderful.

The sacraments were received (again as much as possible) by the whole family. This led to many parents returning to the sacraments. This also required the pastor to make some Solomon-like pastoral judgments about who could do what liturgically. So a somewhat devious strategy, call it covert evangelization, was at play. The sacramental preparation sessions were as much for the parents and sibs as they were for the child preparing to receive the sacraments for the first time. Did this create more work for our team? For sure. Was this challenging? Very much so. Was it messy at times? Absolutely. Was it effective? It was.

The point is that once the parish becomes very serious about what we might call the integrity of family as an expression of church in its own right, parish life and its multiple programs would often take on a new appearance. They would give

evidence of there being in the parish a genuine attitude of acceptance of diversity among individuals and families. Isn't this an important part of what the synods on family are dealing with?

### The future of family and church

It is not unusual to hear "prophets of doom" declare that there is no real future for the family. Armed with statistics on divorce, cohabitation and all sorts of non-conventional communal arrangements, these naysayers predict that the traditional family is old-fashioned and often repressive. They state that as society evolves, new forms of relationships will arise and we all will be happier and more fulfilled in the process.

And there are also those who claim that the organized church will also face a similar future. Granted the Catholic Church is not perfect, nor is its leader, who, claimed at his first appearance as pope that he was a sinner. And as Vatican II said in many different ways, the church can always get better. It's always on pilgrimage.

The nature of family is changing. Thus the need for clear-sighted pastoral and catechetical vision to accommodate this. Families come in diverse sizes and arrangements (which has always been true to some degree). And they will always be needed to provide that stable and trusted social milieu, a community of trusted and reliable love especially for the very young and those nearing the end. In other words, the vulnerable, who are especially valued by Pope Francis.

What does the pope offer as a vision for the future of the church in *The Joy of the Gospel*? What is the well from which he draws nourishment and vitality? Is he not someone energized by hope? The answer is obvious. He exudes vitality and hope – as well as joy.

And what feeds his enthusiasm, his joyfulness about the future? He gives us a glimpse into his spiritual vision toward the end of his exhortation on evangelization. "Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past. It is a vital power

which has permeated the world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. . . . Such is the power of the resurrection, and all who evangelize are instruments of that power.” (*EG*, 276)

Pope Francis speaks as a good pastor, as one with eyes fully open to all the tragedy and misery in the world, but at the same time, he sees something else at work. The presence and power of God which initiates and sustains life in all its diversity and beauty.

And like St. Francis of Assisi, his namesake, he preaches more with actions than words. And his actions carry both substance (like the changes he has orchestrated in the way the Vatican handles finances) and richly symbolic (like his washing the feet of a young Muslim inmate at the Penitential Institute for Minors during last year’s Holy Thursday liturgy).

Here I want to conclude my observations by recalling a grandfatherlike gesture of his that caught the attention of many. I believe that a very reliable way to read his mind and heart (or anyone’s) is to observe how he relates to small children. After all, the children are our future.

By now, virtually the whole world has seen the video of the little seven-year-old boy who decided that Pope Francis needed some help in addressing the families who had come on pilgrimage to St. Peter’s. The scene went viral almost instantly and its reception by all who saw it was pretty much the same. What an amazing sight as Pope Francis, who had quickly gained worldwide attention both inside and outside the Catholic Church, stood in front of St. Peter’s Basilica before thousands of gathered families, with a small boy (clearly not previously vetted) standing right at his side.

Think of the many contrasts this scene suggested. A somewhat older pope with a young child. One of them is following a carefully orchestrated script (well, mostly) and the other spontaneously playing as small children love to do. One in a traditional but simple white cassock and the other in a casual yellow striped rugby shirt. One with a noticeable twinkle in his eye (the pope) and the other engaged in quite serious behavior (the boy). After all, everyone knows that when you have an audience with the pope, this is a serious matter. One was clergy, the other was laity. One, more representing the past and the other, the future. And most everyone

who watched it, after first saying “can you imagine?” ended up with a broad smile. This was a moment. An unprecedented one. And I suggest *one done surely under the influence of God’s grace*, especially considering that the event was not previously scripted, but rather it was spontaneous, playful and certainly unrehearsed.

But that’s not what the television commentators reported. They used phrases like “comic relief” or “an unplanned visit” or “a potentially embarrassing moment.” Of course, no one would expect them to offer a telling religious or spiritual commentary on this scene. That’s not their business.

But I suggest there’s another take on this. One that is right beneath the surface. A grace. An epiphany. A moment of evangelization. Maybe even a visit from the Holy Spirit. Even one of those transformative moments in church life. So let’s go deeper.

The Catholic Church is stitched together by hundreds of years of sameness. Or at least, this is part of its claim. It occasionally gives the impression that the essential features of its teachings and practices are timeless. We are familiar with phrases like “as the church has always taught.” Maybe so. And that’s fine. During times of rapid social and cultural change like ours, it’s helpful to have some sense that what is deep and important remains constant.

But we also know that there’s potentially a downside to this. The church is not separate from the history in which it lives. Vatican II invited the church to dialogue with the contemporary world and seek better ways to engage and address that world, to be a part of that world. It seems to many that the arrival of Pope Francis has increased the possibility of this happening with greater success. Now let’s return to the little boy with the pope.

Think about the interaction that unfolded between the pope and his new friend. Who was in charge? I’d say it was the boy. Who was quite willing to allow him that role? I’d say the pope, as he endearingly ruffled the boy’s hair. Recall also how some adults sought to control the boy. One papal “guard” nearby even tried to bribe him away with what looked like a piece candy. The boy quickly grabbed it and in the same fluid motion turned and hugged the leg of the pope. He knew who the real giver of goodies was.

Then the boy went into action. He tried to block an adult coming forth to greet the pope. After all, he wanted his new friend just for himself. How normal and natural! But realizing he would be unable to do that, he altered his defensive strategy and moved to the offence. He saw a young girl, a bit older than himself, next in line. As one reporter said, he instantly became part of the pope's staff and took her small hand and escorted her to meet his smiling new associate and friend.

Then the boy made his big move. The chair! It was empty because the pope was standing as he spoke to the assembled multitude. The chair of Peter was vacant. *Sede vacante* with a new twist. It must be filled. So again, with the quickness of a spry little boy, he rose to the occasion and sat himself right there. The chair is taken at least for the immediate future. The child was enthroned. Again the pope smiled. All was well.

I don't want to overly dramatize this moment beyond what it truly might mean, but it seems to me that what we have here is a powerful and telling moment in the life of the Catholic Church. The pope for us Catholics represents Christ himself. One of the features of the life of Christ was his availability, his openness to experience so many of life's many aspects. The best indicator of Christ's openness to life was his willingness to interact with a great variety of people. He did not fear intimacy with others nor did he arrange things so that he would meet only certain (approved?) people.

In fact, his manner was the opposite. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He sought contact with lepers (done also by that other Francis) and notice too how many women he attracted, many of whom were not on the social register of his day. And let's not forget that scene when his disciples tried to "protect" him from children. We know his reaction.

I don't think it's pushing it too far to say that the pope was delighted to see the boy break from the crowd and to freely, even playfully, engage him. He also must have known that this could be rather risky business. Still, he went with the flow, as we say, and attended to the child as much as that was possible given this rather unusual situation. We don't know what he said to the little guy, but from what can be observed it might have gone something like this. "Do you want to see this cross hanging around my neck? Here, you can touch it or even kiss it if you want." One

commentator on this scene as it unfolded reminded us of W. C. Field's comment about making movies. Don't use children or animals. You never know what they will do.

Sometimes individuals and organizations attempt to control their affairs as much as possible. They live by stringent rules. They follow carefully prescribed procedures and rituals.

But exercising total control of every situation was not how Jesus lived. I see him entering each situation with attitudes of hope and love, but also with an openness to new possibilities. A certain air of spontaneity prevailed which allowed for a fuller range of humanness to come forth. Perhaps too a deeper sense of God's attitude, God merciful love of *all* women and men.

Maybe that little boy (unknowingly perhaps) had a message for the pope, a message about openness, risk and a willingness to try something new. Something about the importance of children. Every single one of them wherever they might be. Something the church and the world needed to know - and must continue to value. He invited the pope to play with him for a moment on this stage in front of the world's cameras. And in his own delightful way, Pope Francis agreed. A remarkable mutuality unfolded before the eyes of all. Might this indicate a new way of being church? Of connecting with families? Or even of relating to God?

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David M. Thomas holds doctorate in theology from the University of Notre Dame in theology and served as a professor at St. Louis University, St. Meinrad School of Theology and Regis University in Denver. He was appointed a *peritus* for U. S. Bishops at Synod on the Family, 1980. He is author of *Christian Marriage: The New Challenge* (Liturgical Press) and *Community of Love* (Acta Publications). He is also general editor of the RCL/Benziger family life program.

(268 Mallard Loop, Whitefish, MT 59937, 406 862 1117, [dmtii@aol.com](mailto:dmtii@aol.com).)