

Encountering Christ in the Family

Libia Páez-Howard



Family life is crucial in the development of a person. Families provide basic needs for children, fostering physical, emotional, and social growth. Families also assist in spiritual development; the way one is raised often determines the quality of one's relationship to God, church, and community in the future.

Today, with individualism becoming more normative in our culture, reminding ourselves that family comes first is a constant struggle. Accomplishments are almost exclusively interpreted through an individualistic, as opposed to family, perspective.

Children in our society often achieve success in education and employment. Some parents, however, do not participate in this and struggle to cover basic needs on their own. Ironically, the very child who has been supported, nurtured, and loved by a family for 18 or more years is expected to move out of his/her home. Individualism deeply shapes and influences both the family unit and faith development today.

In regards to faith, passing on Christian values is jeopardized not only by individualism but also by secularism. Children are raised in today's secular environment where God is relegated to second, third, or even last to other priorities. God is rarely mentioned in public schools. Social media can be a good thing for catechesis, but it also can divide families by putting the focus on the machine and not the person.

By the grace of God, many parents still bring their children to be initiated into the Christian community. However, there are often big gaps in formation between the time they bring their children to be baptized, receive first Communion, or be confirmed. Many bring their children because it is customary in their family to do so, but they are not convinced themselves that that is what is best for them.

How a person first encounters Jesus within their family is interconnected with the rest of the church and society. As

leaders in our faith community, we can and need to help parents/guardians be the first evangelizers of children.

TWO TYPES OF SOCIETIES

There are two types of societies: socio-centric and ego-centric. Each one has its pros and cons. I write from a socio-centric perspective; it is not a perfect model, but it is the lens through which I view my experience as the woman I am today.

I grew up in a big family. Our household included ten siblings, my parents Guillermo and Ana, my uncle Atanasio, and often a cousin of ours or a godchild of my parents. Since we lived in a *barrio* in the city and our family originated from the rural area, there was always an additional relative who would stay with us during the week, either because they were studying or working. There were other 'temporary guests' staying with us for different reasons as well. Finally, it was wonderful to have my grandmother (*abuela* Juana) living a block from our house. She came to live with our family for her final five years.

In a socio-centric community, the individual represents the family. One's triumphs represent family triumphs. Shame is communal. Unless an unmarried young adult had no choice but to go away, he/she would never dream of leaving the family home before married.

Living at home from a socio-centric perspective is not synonymous with how the ego-centric culture understands 'providing' for someone. It means, rather, that a person takes an active part in the dynamics of the family, helping with chores, expenses, caring for the sick and elderly, contributing to the guidance of younger siblings or relatives, and having fun as a family member. The adult child still has friends with whom they go out and share in groups. These friends, however, also become friends of the family.

The extended family, godparents, and neighbors are also very much involved in the upbringing of the children, helping instill family values and beliefs. They even step in to help economically if needed. Family is always bigger than people living under one

*How a person first encounters
Jesus within their family
is interconnected with the rest
of the church and society.*



Photo by Steven Depolo

roof. The saying, “It takes a village to raise a child,” very much applies here. The *National Directory of Catechesis* recognizes the role of the extended family by saying that its members “often take on a primary responsibility in transmitting the faith to younger members. Their shared wisdom and experience often constitute a compelling Christian witness” (29 D).

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

Throughout Sacred Scriptures, a relationship between people and God is narrated. It points to the individual as part of a community and family. The Son of God, divine and human, was also born into a family unit. The family as the nucleus of society gives each of its members the necessary tools to participate in the wider society. The relationship of children with their parents, siblings, and other members of the family, teaches the person how to relate to others and how to be responsible members of a society.

Family is the nucleus of the church. In family, children are evangelized. “Parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children” (*Familiaris Consortio* 39). The Holy Family serves as the paradigm for catechesis and evangelization. The child Jesus learned how to relate to God from his parents, Mary and Joseph.

Children learn about true love in family life. Families teach children who God is and introduce them to the community, where faith becomes public. Parents are called to be the representation of God in the family, and to be models of a healthy relationship with God and others. For Christians, it is in the family where the child first encounters Jesus, learns to relate to him and to be his disciple: To love God with all his/her heart, with all his/her soul, with all his/her mind; and to love his/her neighbor as him/herself (Mt 22:37-39). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says it very clearly:

Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for education in the virtues....Parents should teach their children to subordinate the ‘material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones.’ Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children. By knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them. (2223)

By the time a child begins to prepare for holy Eucharist, he/she already should have a clear knowledge of who God is and

what it means to live as a Christian, in spite of not being able to fully comprehend this. A shorter life experience should not be equal to ignorance of the Trinitarian God:

Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child's earliest years. This already happens when family members help one another to grow in faith by the witness of a Christian life in keeping with the Gospel. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation as children of God. (CCC 2226)

In the socio-centric model, responsibility to guide a child is not merely the responsibility of household members; this responsibility rests within the entire community, beginning with nearby relatives, godparents, and neighbors (considered to be *la segunda familia* — the second family.) Parents are never alone in the endeavor of modeling faith to their children.

Children learn from the events that happen in the lives of each member of the family — including learning from the mistakes of others. Parents can use any kind of incident to help form the conscience of a child. Conscience formation depends upon families to sort things out.

PERSONAL EXAMPLES OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

Christ is encountered concretely at home in loving relationships built upon forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation. A few examples of my experience follow.

I learned about unconditional service to others from my mother. My mother was the one who took care of a neighbor child who was very sick and whose mother was dying of cancer. She was the one who would cure the sick dog or hen, the one who accompanied neighbors to get their birth certificates in remote places, and the one who lobbied for providing hospitality for needy people from the community. In her old age, mom does what she can to help others by praying for them.

What impacted me the most from my father's example was the way he lived in a spirit of reconciliation. Testimony to this is that he never raised his voice, but we always knew where he stood when we went to complain about one of our siblings. His favorite phrase: “¡Pero, eso pasó ayer!” (That happened yesterday, didn't it?) We knew that it had happened only a couple of minutes before, but we understood exactly what he meant.

From my grandmother, I learned about devotion. She was a *rezandera* — the one that leads the novena for the dead. My *abuela* did not know how to read or write, but she knew how to pray the rosary in the most beautiful and “complete” way. She was the one who would make sure that there was always an altar with the *Santos* and a lit candle.

When my father had a bad accident and was unable to work, my baptismal godparents stepped up to help our family. My

padrino brought two liters of milk to our house every day for two solid years while my father was incapacitated.

All the members make up the family, and each can make a unique contribution to creating the basic environment in which a sense of God's loving presence is awakened and faith in Jesus Christ is confessed, encouraged, and lived. Within the Christian family, the members first begin to learn the basic prayers of the tradition and to form their consciences in light of the teaching of Christ and the Church. Family members learn more of the Christian life by observing each other's strengths or weaknesses than by formal instruction. (NDC 29 D)

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN THE PARISH COMMUNITY — AN EXTENSION OF THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

For parents, education of children represents their “true ministry” (FC 38), beginning in the home and continuing in the church community in partnership with pastors, catechists, and other ministers. It is the responsibility of the faith community to support and assist the parents in the exercising of this ministry and to help the family to fulfill its task of “sharing in the life and mission of the Church” (FC 17).

The church community is the communal “*padrinos/madrinas*” (sponsors/godparents) for the family, helping the parents in their role of primary catechists of their children. Catechesis is the responsibility of the whole faith community. It is the “common responsibility,” under the leadership of the pastor, of the “Christian community, a task that involves all” (GDC 224).

Parents want what is best for their children. They usually try to be the best parents they can be by modeling the good things they learned while growing up. In regards to passing on faith, parents also try to do the best they can.

My 30-plus years of catechetical experience tells me that many parents feel inadequate when it comes to explaining the faith to their children. Some parents who do not believe in God simply follow a family tradition, bringing their children to the church for sacramental preparation. Others come to support the child because he/she wanted to make their first Communion or confirmation. To top these situations, many parishes lack the trained catechetical personnel to fulfill the responsibility entrusted to them by the church.

In the United States, many parents are raising their children without the support of an extended family system. Sometimes when trying to raise children according to the teachings of Jesus and the church, parents might feel as if they are swimming against the current in a river full of religious pluralism. It can be overwhelming for parents to take on a task that in many countries belongs to the whole family (including the extended family) and the neighborhood, as it happens in socio-centric communities.

Both my husband and I are theologians. We had the privilege of being able to discuss with our children the teachings of the

Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition of the church. Nonetheless, it was not an easy task because we lacked a support system where the values we were teaching our children could be reinforced and strengthened.

In our married life, we have belonged to two parishes. When our children had questions about the Sunday readings or the homily, we were provided with an opportunity to continue a catechetical conversation. Still, while participating in catechesis at both parishes, programs were sacramental but not systematic. Besides that, as Christian parents, it was a difficult task deconstructing inaccurate catechetical teachings by unqualified catechists.

It is imperative, then, that the church is intentional in helping families become small communities of faith — places where faith in God develops throughout the years, and where the vocation to respond to God's call is fostered. As it is well stated by the CCC, "The parish is the Eucharistic community and the heart of the liturgical life of Christian families; it is a privileged place for the catechesis of children and parents" (2226).

Through its catechesis and witness, the church community can be a strong pillar in the life of each family member. What follows are some practical comments and suggestions based on my experience as a member of my family both in Venezuela and in the U.S. and as a catechetical minister for the majority of my life.

1. Pay special attention to the lone immigrant. That is, the person who comes to this country without any relatives or friends. It is brutal for the mind and soul to be uprooted from the environment in which one grew up, having to begin anew, to develop a "new" life, new relationships. It does not matter under what circumstances the person left his/her country of origin. Lend a listening ear and a supportive shoulder.
2. Any family needs the support of other families in order to become an ideal place where each member can grow in the faith. Follow up with newlyweds or parents of newly baptized children. A support system needs to begin as soon as they register for marriage or baptismal preparation. Develop a system of sponsor/sister families — train families to accompany other families in their role as new spouses or parents.
3. Offer catechesis for all ages — *from womb to tomb* — including catechesis for children of pre-school age. These are the years in which the children can be more influenced by any figure of authority. There is no time to lose.
4. Do not wait until your parish needs someone to coordinate catechesis or youth ministry to begin sending people to train for these ministries. "The single most critical factor in an effective parish catechetical program is the leadership of a professionally trained parish catechetical leader" (NDC 54 B).

5. Prepare catechists to exercise their ministry to the best of their potential. Both initial and ongoing formation are crucial. Good textbooks are not enough.
6. Consider offering systematic catechetical formation for parents. Several priests have adopted this model in Chicago and the results have been amazing! Parents speak of how the formation helps them to grow in their own faith and to be able to talk to their children about the faith.
7. Help families re-discover the value of the faith tradition practices they do at home and to understand what it means in relation to their Catholic faith and be able to explain it to the children.
8. Provide resources to parents that give them tools to help the children and themselves be critical, through the lenses of Christian values, of what they see in social and mainstream media, and be able to converse about it as a family.
9. On July 1, 2013, the Archdiocese of Chicago launched the *Year of Strong Catholic Parents* as part of a five-year Strategic Pastoral Plan that is in its third year. It offers resources that parishes can use in the faith formation for families (check archchicago.org). An initiative for this year's Strategic Plan is a process called *Strong Catholic Families: Strong Catholic Youth* (see familyministries.org), a national initiative presented in partnership by NFCYM, NCCL, NAC-FLM and NCEA. The main goal is to help parishes partner "with parents to bring home the faith."

A parish needs to find initiatives that fit well with the reality of its community. The important thing is to make sure that the parish is "the privileged place for the catechesis of children and parents" that it is called to be (CCC 2226).

"Because they gave life to their children, parents have a most serious obligation and the right to educate them. It is therefore, primarily the responsibility of Christian parents to ensure the Christian education of their children in accordance with the teaching of the Church" (CIC 226, 2). The responsibility for this, however, does not stop with the parents. All of us in the community of faith are responsible to help them in this endeavor.

In a poem, Pablo Neruda writes, "*Cuando se tiene un hijo, se tienen todos los hijos del mundo.*" (When you have a child, you have all the children in the world.) The children of our community are our children. We are all members of one big family that goes beyond the doors of the house inhabited by immediate family members. May the grace of God, through the Holy Spirit and the example of the Master Catechist, Jesus Christ, guide us in this ministry. ■

Libia Pérez-Howard, a native of Venezuela, is the Coordinator of Leadership Formation in Spanish and the Vicariate III Catechetical Coordinator in the Archdiocese of Chicago. She holds a Master of Divinity from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.