

REVITALIZING THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD AS MODEL CHURCH

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This paper retrieves the ecclesiological model of household of God and reappropriate it within our present context to appreciate the meaning and relevance of being Church in our time. The church in the home exemplifies ecclesiastical ministries originating from the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God namely, koinonia, kerygma, leitourgia, diakonia and marturia.¹ As a household of God, the Church, embodies being gathered as a community by the Spirit of Jesus. To be a “church is more than simply a meeting; more than a loose and casual gathering as when people get together for a party,”² because it is a community where people share their life together in fellowship of love and true family spirit (cf. Acts of the Apostles 4-5). This involves a mutual commitment of each member to all the other members. All Christians are children of God and brothers and sisters to each other. This kind of commitment requires that those who are gathered enter into covenant with one another to ensure the well-being of every family member. Just like the human families, the Church as household of God dedicates all its efforts to the realization of God’s kingdom in the world. Their love and communion testify to God’s motherly/fatherly love for the children born out of God’s unparalleled benevolence to humanity (see Isa. 49: 15-16).

INTRODUCTION

Becoming church in our time, challenges us to reflect using the lens of a household which is officially articulated as the church in the home or *ecclesia domestica*; a miniature church (see PCP II,

¹ Thomas Groome, *What makes us catholic?* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, Inc. 2022),120-121.

² Steve Cowan, *The Household of God: An Introduction to the Church*, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://founders.org/2011/01/14/the-household-of-god-an-introduction-to-the-church/>.

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art # 421; Lumen Gentium art # 11; *Familiaris Consortio*, art. #49).
To wit:

We must examine the many profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a "Church in miniature" (*Ecclesia domestica*), in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church, (*Familiaris Consortio*, art. #49)

But this is not really new to the way of being church since its emergence and development which was noticeable during the time of Paul's missionary journeys. In fact, this model, "household church" was explicitly mentioned in some of the biblical passages cited here (see Acts 2:46; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15). With the pandemic, we were forced to rethink what it means to be church when restrictions on mass gatherings to worship forced families to stay home and pray with the household instead of attending the traditional liturgical services celebrated in churches. It must have been accidental for many to experience this way of being church but it is also an opportune time to relive this ecclesiological model which responded to the context believers found themselves into. At this juncture, the words of the Council prompt us that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. #4).

HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

We begin this reflection on the theology of being church (or ecclesiology) by examining a biblical metaphor used to refer to the church, namely, household of God. Although one of the most popular metaphors used by Paul was the "Body of Christ" which highlights the unity in diversity within the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12-27), his letters also present an alternative metaphor: *the church as God's household* (see 1Tim. 3:15). Paul used this very significantly in his correspondence with the leaders of the small Christian churches emerging from his proclamation of the Gospel. Our initial reading

of these letters reveals Paul's preference to highlight the Jewish culture of close family ties or intimate relationship within the household as a model for church.

In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul writes, "although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in *God's household*, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." It is clear that the metaphor of a household is Paul's primary way of conceiving how the church should be like at its inception. "A household is a family understood as an organized unit with structure, lines of authority, and particular functions. And because the church, as God's household, is also the pillar and foundation of the truth (see 1 Tim. 3:15),"³ Paul seriously admonished and instructed Timothy about how they should conduct themselves since they are part of a *household of God*. Even the manner of leadership has to be patterned after the head of the family's exemplary management of one's immediate household (see 1 Tim. 3:1-5).

Notice that the emphasis on being called children of a loving Father-God which could be gleaned from several biblical passages both in the Old and in the New Testament (see Isa. 64:8; Mal. 2:10; Ps. 103:13; 1 John 3:1; Mt. 6:26; Rom. 8:32). This indicates that the household of God as metaphor for church was rooted in the Judeo-Christian Tradition handed on to us by the first household churches. Their experience of being a household within their cultural milieu was used to articulate what it meant to be a church at that time. It was the best representation of a community gathered in love of God in Jesus and moved by the Spirit to fulfill one mission and retell their experience of the kingdom.

Metaphors about God as loving parent or compassionate mother to the children were also used by believers when they tried to make sense of God's way of relating to them. Take for example, this excerpt from the book of Hosea where God was described as a loving parent to Israel, "yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed

³ Ibid.

them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos. 11:3-4). “God took care of them, took pains with them, not only as *a father*, or a tutor, but as *a mother*, or nurse. When they were in the wilderness, God showed them the way in which they should go, and bore them up, taking them by the arms.”⁴ These clearly articulated the projection of a loving parent as God’s way of relating to Israel. Their family orientation was the basis of understanding how God communicated to them.

No less than Jesus introduced God as *abba*-king (see Mt. 23:9; Lk. 11:1-4); and considered himself as the son of this Father-God (see Lk. 10:21-22; Jn. 14:10) whose compassion to a lost son prevails over sin or social norms that exclude the erring child from the household (see Lk. 15:11-32). The Lord’s prayer or the Our Father taught by Jesus to his disciples emphasized Jesus’ experience of God as loving father to all; a God who looks after the needs of his children and guides them to a life oriented towards the flourishing of the kingdom where the well-being of everyone comes first.⁵ Jesus’ intimate relationship with God as *abba*-king was evident in the manner by which he lived and related with people he came in contact with. In fact, he has encouraged his followers to relate to God in a similar way when he instructed them how they should pray (see Mt. 6:9-13).

As a household of God, the church, embodies being gathered as a community by the Spirit of Jesus. To be a “church is more than simply a meeting; more than a loose and casual gathering as when people get together for a party”⁶ because it is a community where people share their life with and ensure that the welfare of all is seriously considered (see Acts of the Apostles 4-5). This involves a mutual commitment because all are children of God and brothers and sisters to each other. This kind of commitment requires that those who are gathered together enter into covenant with one another to ensure the well-being of every family member. Just like

⁴Matthew Henry’s Bible Commentary, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=mhc&b=28&c=11>

⁵Jose de Mesa, *The Prayer our Lord Taught us*. (San Juan, Manila: Center for Collaborative and Creative Ministry, 2005), 27-29.

⁶Cowan, *The Household of God...*

the human families, the church as household of God dedicates all its efforts to the realization of God's kingdom in the world. Their love and communion testify to God's motherly love for the children born out of God's unparalleled benevolence to humanity (see Isa. 49: 15-16).

The church in the home exemplifies ecclesiastical ministries witnessed to by the early Christians as they proclaim the kingdom of God. Thomas Groome suggests five specific tasks which all Christian households should take part in, namely, "*koinonia*: to be an inclusive community of faith, hope and love..., *kerygma*: to evangelize, preach and teach God's word of liberating salvation..., *leitourgia*: to worship God publicly as an assembly of Christian people..., *diakonia*: to care for human needs..., and *marturia*: to bear credible public witness to Christian faith..."⁷

KOINONIA

It is truism that the family is the first school of love and communion experienced intimately by its members (see PCP II, art. # 576). Bound not just by flesh and blood, they exemplify the beauty of harmony and unity through the closely knit relationships they have with one another. As a church, we are gathered in love like a family where we encounter the person of Jesus through His Spirit who continues to guide and inspire us to become a community of disciples and a household of God. This communion is rooted in what we "share in common" and in the "common story of being loved by God in Jesus" who reached out to us and initiated a life-giving relationship (see Jn. 3:16).

The Greek term, *koinonia* originated from word *koinonos*, which means "partner, sharer, and companion. In short, it is a shared community that involves deep, close-knit participation among its people."⁸ This finds resonance to the kind of communion experienced in most families, especially in the country.

⁷ Groome, *What makes...*, 121-122.

⁸ Jessica Brodie, "What Every Christian Needs to Know about Koinonia," accessed September 18, 2021, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-every-christian-needs-to-know-about-koinonia.html>.

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Intimacy is not an abstract reality among Filipinos because this has become part of their upbringing. The premium given to intimacy that is very personal is passed on to children spontaneously once they are born and welcomed to the household. This manner of caring is often expressed in cuddling, talking to, touching, feeding, and singing of lullabies while softly rocking the infant to put her/him to sleep. Children are never left alone to fend for themselves and when the parents are at work, the older siblings, a female helper or extended members of the household such as aunts or grandmothers take care of them.⁹ Within the culture we have direct experience of personalized care which fosters intimate relationships. As such we may experience what being church as *koinonia* or intimate fellowship within the household. Through it, we are given the opportunity to experience what it means to care for and to be cared for; to accept and be accepted; to be one despite our differences.

In the bible, *koinonia* has several connotations. First, it is an *intimate communion of persons* where love and togetherness sustain fellowship and solidify unity among believers. Just like families made one by their intimate relationships, the church has to exemplify this aspect of life where communion is truly felt. Solidarity comes about as a result of their common desire to share their experience of God in Jesus which transformed them into “new creations” (see 2 Cor. 5:17) and household churches that reach out to the most vulnerable members of the community (see Acts 2:42-47). What best marked their communion is love for God and for one another; a radical living out of Jesus’ command to all those who wish to be his disciples (see Jn. 13:35). Love is at the heart of Christian household because this is central to our faith in Jesus, the Christ, who imaged a compassionate God (see Col. 1:15). The common unity of mission spurs the family of God to become closely intertwined, because this unity “strives to overcome brokenness, divisiveness, and, ultimately gaining wholeness with each of the members, with their environment, and with their God.”¹⁰ When

⁹ “Child Rearing in the Philippines,” accessed October 5, 2021, <https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Philippines>.

¹⁰ Greg Fletcher, “The Biblical Gospel of the Kingdom,” accessed September 2, 2021 <https://fletchergreg.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/p-church.pdf>.

there is reciprocity and supportive environment, the church in its *koinonia* overcomes two of the worst human fears: being betrayed or being demeaned by the community so that a familial bond emerges with trust and genuine concern sustained.

Second, *koinonia* implies sharing and participation in the building up of the community. No Household will thrive in fellowship if the members refuse to take on their responsibilities seriously. Commitment to the well-being of everyone is key to harmony and genuine communion. The sense of sacrifice and hard work expected of each member will automatically come about without much prodding when initiated in the spirit of dedication to ensure the welfare of all members of the household. In the Philippine context, there are metaphors used to highlight the unique roles the family members fulfill to ensure stability, security, and joy in their relationships. The mother is said to be the “light of the home” (*ang ilaw ng tahanan*) which accentuates her guidance, warmth, and caring love. She is the first teacher of values and confidante we can turn to anytime for wise advice or a shoulder to cry on.¹¹ Similarly, the father is considered the “pillar of the family” (*haligi ng tahanan*) because he is the sturdy foundation of the household. The discipline, material provisions, and security he provides the household propels it to becoming a life-giving community.¹² St. Paul asserts the same roles among the members of the Church when he used the metaphor “Body of Christ” to remind the household churches of their variety of roles as members of the fellowship (*koinonia*) all were called to be part of. Jesus is the “head” and all the members form the body. Everyone jointly contributes to the good of the community; each according to the gifts they were given by the same Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12: 12-27).

Third, *koinonia* points to *partnership or companionship* where people are joined together to create an aligned relationship. For example, two people may enter into marriage in order to have *koinonia of life* or to live a life together where everything is shared.

¹¹ “Mother’s Day,” *Philippine Digest*, May 8, 2017, accessed October 17, 2021, <http://phildigest.jp/mothers-day/>

¹² Prosy Torrechante, “The high calling of fatherhood,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 16, 2018, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/113957/high-calling-fatherhood>.

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The household best exemplifies this characteristic of being church because of the covenantal bond forged out of committed love by a man and a woman. They become partners in life and for life as they build up their household into a community. They share everything in common and journey through married life in mutual support and partnership. “Fellowship creates a mutual bond which overrides each individual’s pride, vanity, and individualism, fulfilling the human yearning with fraternity, belonging, and companionship.”¹³ Note that generous sharing proceeds from the spirit of mutual trust and confidence that one has a dependable companion or partner to rely on. Filipinos are known to experience the same in their families because no matter what happens or what they do, they will always be accepted or supported in their endeavors. The early church found this to be true in the household churches which engendered aiming for the greater good of everyone and sharing everything in common (see Acts 4:32).

The local concept of “*kapatid*” (sibling)¹⁴ is worth considering at this juncture. As children of God, to regard each other as brothers and sisters in Christ highlights this strong connection that joints us together into one household church. Being “*kapatid*” indicates originating from the same source since the word is a combination of two words “*ka* = part of and *patid* = cut from” which when put together implies being cut from the same cord where we were all connected to from the very beginning of our life in the womb of our mother.¹⁵ As Christians, we believe that we are also connected or joint together by our being children of a loving Father introduced to us by Jesus and are brothers and sisters who should look after each other with genuine concern and fraternal love prevailing in our relationships. When the churches spread in the Roman Empire, the neighboring communities hurled criticisms to these household churches and out of defense for the kind of relationships among them, Tertullian (a leader in Carthage

¹³ “Koinonia,” accessed October 5, 2021, https://donshevey.com/2009_zine/KOINONIA.

¹⁴ Virgilio Almario, ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino*. (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2001), 423.

¹⁵ TIL “Kapatid/”Utol” Etymology is surprisingly endearing,” January 13, 2016, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://imgur.com/r/Philippines/E6yYJbm>.

during the second century) wrote, “It is mainly the *deeds of a love so noble* that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say...”¹⁶ Marked by love for one another, the members of the church just like siblings in the household, look after each other and take responsibility for each other’s welfare.

KERYGMA

The Greek word, *kerygma* literally means “proclamation” of the Gospel to those who have yet to know it or for those who hear the word of God for the first time.¹⁷ In the New Testament, the apostles preached this good news of God’s salvation in Jesus to towns and villages both populated by Jews and the Gentile communities. Before one is baptized and welcomed to the household churches, the “catechumenate” (those who were instructed about the Christian faith before their baptism) would listen to the oral instructions provided by the leaders of the church. The intent of this proclamation among the early Christians was conversion or faith in Jesus as the Christ. By re-telling the faith narratives of conversion of those who encountered Jesus, they believed that others may also accept Jesus as one who came to save us.¹⁸

God’s communication of good news is not new in the Tradition. Since Old Testament, we encounter many “messengers” of God who articulated God’s saving acts (see the prophetic writings). At the beginning of Luke’s gospel, we are told that an angel proclaimed to Mary God’s saving plan (Lk. 1: 26-38). This proclamation (*kerygma*) was accepted in faith by Mary which engendered the fulfillment of God’s offer of salvation in Jesus. We also find Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God wherever he went (see Mt. 4:17; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 4:18). In the Acts, we witness Peter and

¹⁶ As quoted by Erickson, Tim in *The Apology*, ch. 39. Retrieved on September 21, 2021 at <https://www.morningsidecommunitychurch.com/pastors-blog/see-how-they-love-one-another-1-peter-122-23-1-peter-series>

¹⁷ “Kerygma and Catechesis,” *Britannica* accessed September 8, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/kerygma>.

¹⁸ “Catechumen” *Britannica* accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/catechumen>.

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the apostles proclaiming their experience of conversion in Jesus which they hope those who were listening to them will also experience. This proclamation of the good news made real in Jesus was effective because “those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day about 3,000 in all,” and “each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved,” (see Acts 2:41 & 47).

It is within a household that the “word made flesh” (Jesus) was proclaimed (kerygma) and accepted not just in the womb of his mother, Mary, but more importantly into a family which nurtured and prepared him to fulfill his mission. Within this environment, Jesus experienced God’s compassion and parental care, thus, affording him the intimate experience of considering God as “abba-king,” (see Mt. 12:50; Mt. 18:10; Jn. 14:7). Jesus like most young Jewish children was raised up according to the customs and traditions of his family as could be gleaned from the narratives that featured him going to the synagogues for communal worship and studying of the scriptures where he eventually preached (cf. Lk. 4:15-33; Mk. 1:21). He also celebrated the Passover meal (see Mt. 26:17-18) and travelled to Jerusalem to see Jewish Temple (see Mt. 21:1-11, Mk. 11:1-11, Lk. 19:28-44, Jn. 12:12-19).

Indeed, it is within the culture of a household that the seeds of the Gospel should first be planted if one hopes that they thrive and bear fruits. Proclaiming the Gospel through the family’s way of life and relationships would be more effective means of evangelization because the witness of Christian life perceived by children through their parents affords them to “experience the closeness of God and leaves decisive traces which last throughout life.”¹⁹ Pope Paul VI reiterates that “the family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply

¹⁹ *General Directory for Catechesis*, (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), 226.

lived by them.”²⁰ At the heart of evangelization is the family’s singular role in shaping the faith of its children and in proclamation (kerygma) of the loving communion desired by God for all.

The household provides the opportunity for the church in the home to be acquainted with the Gospel values embodied by Jesus and passed on through the preaching and witnessing of Christian families through the years. By virtue of our baptism, we have been enjoined to be proclaimers of the good news of our salvation. Paul in 1 Cor 9:16, declared "woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! If the message we proclaim truly transformed our hearts, it moves us to passionately share it with others. Recall the story about the disciples’ encounter with Jesus on the way to Emmaus (see Lk. 24:13-35). In this narrative, Jesus is recognized as a companion whose presence ignited a sense of hope and comfort amidst dark moments in the lives of the disciples. Likewise, every household is on a journey and the way to the kingdom is not easy, but the reassuring presence of Jesus is embodied in the household’s supportive companionship. This is what kerygma is all about; it moves the household to be proclaimers of the kingdom which finds its realization in their midst.

There is a need for the family to establish some family rituals and traditions around the “word of God” besides living out the values of the kingdom. The bible is a rich resource for understanding the Christian Faith and is the primary source of what we believe in as Christians. Praying together using the scriptures (or *lectio divina*) will nurture the family spirituality and deepen the sense of communion among the members. It is an opportune time to study the word of God and share lessons which could be derived from reading the bible as a family.²¹ It is not difficult to outline some ways to keep the faith alive as a household: praying the grace before meals, setting a specific time for prayer as

²⁰ Paul VI, *Familiaris Consortio* art. 52, accessed http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html

²¹ Becky Eldredge, “Lectio Divina” *Loyola Press*, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/lectio-divina/>

a family, discussing the feast days of saints and seasons celebrated by the church, engaging in moral education, such as a positive and prudent education in sexuality at the appropriate time. This formation is meant to happen through a dialogue of trust and openness between parents and children.

Among the metaphors used to reiterate this ministry of the church is that of a *mother and teacher* at the same time (Latin, *mater et magistra*). In the words of St. Pope John XXIII, “to her was entrusted by her holy Founder the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them—both as individuals and as nations—with maternal care.”²² This may find resonance to our family experience of being taught by our mother about many of the “firsts” that we have experienced since we have reached our school age. Most often, it is the mother who also plays the role of a teacher; helping their children with their assignments or projects, guiding them in their first steps, holding their hands as they try to write their names, teaching them how to pray, cheering them on as they take part in programs or field demonstrations in school and being a confidante in times of sadness. Indeed, mothers educate the children to learn the basic values of the Christian faith and encourage them to become good persons so that they can live well.

The church as a motherly teacher reminds us of the ethical principles culled from the teachings of Jesus which will guide and direct our lives. These are set before us to challenge and move us to live by the Gospel values despite the proliferation of contrast values in the world. In this evangelizing ministry of the church, we are taught by her like a fully committed mother who “offers her children the spiritual nourishment which nurtures and makes the Christian life bear fruit.”²³ While the affectionate and gentle love of a mother is exemplified in this image of the church, her singular role as teacher who hands on the wisdom and truth of the Christian

²² John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, accessed January 10, 2022 http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html

²³ Pope Francis. “Catechesis on the Church,” accessed October 22, 2021, <http://www.totus2us.com/teaching/francis-catechesis-on-the-church/the-church-is-mother/>.

faith is also reiterated as essential to the growth of her children. In and through the church we receive the Word of God which transforms us from within so that we may go out to the world and bear witness to the Gospel. Parents as the first catechists of the Christian faith²⁴ because they introduce the concept of God in the household and teach their children basic knowledge about God's saving love for everyone.

KERYGMA

“Liturgy (*leitourgia*) is a Greek composite word meaning originally a public duty, a service to the state undertaken by a citizen.”²⁵ This was often identified with the rich families in Athens who could spend for these occasions or projects which primarily benefited the poor in the community. Later this secular or state duty of a citizen took on a religious meaning when it was used to describe the sacrificial offerings performed by priests for the community of believers. In the bible, this word was used to indicate a public service of the temple (see Ex. 38:27; 39:12) which was one of the functions of the priest as he performed rituals for the people (see Joel 1:9, 2:17).²⁶ “Throughout the Old Covenant, the word *leitourgia* is often associated with the priestly service of worship through offerings (Num. 8:22; 16:9; Ez. 45:4). This is reflected in Heb. 8:6, which is describing Christ's priestly service/ministry under the New Covenant.”²⁷

For us Christians, liturgy implies official public worship of the Church which includes all the rites, ceremonies, prayers, and sacraments that highlight the significant experiences of the community of believers or the household churches. The Second Vatican Council describes liturgy as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font

²⁴ *Acts and Decrees of Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, art. 576.

²⁵ “Liturgy,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09306a.htm>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “Why liturgical worship?” accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.northparkpres.com/blog/2017/9/8/why-liturgical-worship>.

from which all her power flows.”²⁸ This means that worshipping together allows God’s grace to suffuse us that we may be renewed and empowered to fulfill our mission. While it is the source of our strivings for the kingdom to come in our midst, it is also the ultimate vision which we hope to achieve. In fact, the household churches were sustained as by their communion celebrated through the breaking of the bread in their homes and in their communal prayers (cf. Acts 2:42-47).

Praying together is an indispensable act of faith for every Christian household. The popular saying, “the family that prays together, stays together,”²⁹ reiterates the wisdom behind this practice. When families spend time praying together, they build up relationships rooted in faith and nurtured by stability, genuine concern, and supportive presence among the members. Being nurtured not just by material provisions, households with vibrant prayer life provides the spiritual and socio-emotional strength necessary to cope with tribulations they may encounter. A study conducted by Journal of Family Psychology in 2018 revealed the effective impact of prayer in enhancing intimacy, harmony, and unity among family members. It “demonstrated that couple and family prayer provided opportunities for togetherness, social support, interaction, and connectedness... prayer provides a ritual that is a potentially unique pathway to family cohesion.”³⁰

The desire to pray as a means to connect with God indicates faith and confidence in the loving presence of God who wills that we live a good and happy life. Did Jesus not promise that when we gather in his name, he is in our midst (see Mt. 18:20)? Many families claim that their relationships when established around their faith in God become sturdy and closely knit. “Prayer

²⁸ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

²⁹ Popularized by Patrick Peyton as quoted by Lloyd, Susie, “The Family that Prays Together Stays Together,” *Catechist*, April 2, 2018, accessed October 25, 2021 <https://www.catechist.com/family-prays-together-stays-together/>.

³⁰ Rachael Popcak, Gregory Popcak, “Prayer Power – A New Study Reveals the True Meaning of the family that prays together, stays together,” August 14, 2018, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithonthecouch/2018/08/prayer-power>.

helps couples deal with stress, enables them to focus on shared beliefs and hopes for the future, and allows them to deal constructively with challenges and problems in their relationship and in their lives.”³¹ Family prayers may be passed on as traditions or rituals that younger members could assimilate and embrace as their own legacy to the next generations as well. This is the same with our Christian prayers or rituals. They began in family homes and were eventually institutionalized to become part of the official liturgy of the church.

When we talk about liturgical worship as a church, we recall the value of offering sacrifices to exemplify what generous sharing and self-less love for God and for one another would require of us. We take our cue from Jesus who offered himself and his whole life to ensure our salvation so that we may be given the grace to live “godly lives,” (see Titus 2: 11-12). Within the Christian tradition, we come across different forms of sacrifice practiced by the household churches, namely, giving generously (see Heb. 13:16; Phil. 4:180), offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ (see 1 Pet. 2:5), offering of praise, thanksgiving, and confession of faith (Heb. 13:15), and living our own lives as testimony of God’s unconditional love for all (see Rom. 12:1). These encapsulate the fundamental themes of true worship of God celebrated in the highest form of liturgical rite we observe as Christians – the Holy Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the central act of worship of the family of God. Through its celebration, the paschal sacrifice, Jesus, who obtained for us life in its fullness (see Jn. 10:10) and re-assured us of the saving love of God our Father (Jn. 3:16) is commemorated and acknowledged with awe and reverence by all those who believe. It gathers us into one household and cement our intimate relationship as a church. It was around the Word of God (now, Liturgy of the Word) and the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup (now, Liturgy of the Eucharist) that the house churches were nourished and revitalized in their communion and mission. Jesus was said to have instructed the disciples to continue the table

³¹ Alysse ElHage, *The Power of Prayer for Families*, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-power-of-prayer-for-families>.

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fellowship he began with them if they want to remember him (see Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). The essence of the Eucharist is embodied in Jesus' person, life, and ministry. When we come together as God's family, the real presence of Jesus is sacramentally experienced by the worshipping community.

Four actions as part of the family of God which were also culled from our Judeo-Christian Tradition may be gleaned from the Eucharistic celebration.

1) Remembering

Just like the Jews who relived the Passover meal that brought to life their liberation from slavery, Christians remember and relive the saving love of God in Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. We accompany Jesus in his life's journey and re-imagine how he freely offered his life for our sake. As a family, we share in this paschal mystery as we struggle daily to cope with difficulties of life and rise together despite challenging situations we face.

2) Thanking

The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word "*eukharistia*"³² which literally means "thanksgiving." This means that our coming together is an act of gratitude for God's gracious kindness and dependable promise which was made real in Jesus. We thank God for not giving up on us and for trusting us with life and all the resources we are blessed with so that we may live quality lives. When we eat our meals together as one family, we are not only nurtured physically, but we are also taught to share selflessly as brothers and sisters in the Lord's table where unconditional acceptance of one another prevails.

3) Worshipping

³² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Eucharist," accessed October 9, 2021 <https://www.usccb.org/eucharist>.

Jesus, our mediator to the Father, inspires us to put our trust in this benevolent God whom he believes is an Abba-King to us. This suggests that the God we believe in is a loving Father to all of us and a just King who wills only what is good for us. When we worship as one family, we acknowledge our dependence on God and entrust our lives in the divine will. In humility, we acknowledge that every good gift comes from God who remains committed to our well-being (see James 1:17).

4) Committing

In the Eucharistic celebration, we are sent to the world to proclaim through our life the coming of the kingdom; the good news that God loves us! We become witnesses of the transforming power of Jesus' Spirit who empowers us to commit our lives to the Word of God. Our commitment is renewed and intensified when we realize that through our family life, we make evident and tangible the unconditional love of God in Jesus.

To see the Eucharist as the core of our liturgical life as a church is to affirm the effective impact of communal prayer. "Through celebrating the Eucharist, we are brought together as a caring, sharing, helping community which carries on Jesus' work in the world."³³ As one family, we are enjoined to highlight in our lives the essence of being and becoming a Eucharistic church within our homes. The whole cycle of our life as a household of God is beautifully celebrated in the Holy Eucharist: welcoming, accepting, forgiving, committing to each other's welfare, celebrating triumphs, sharing meals, serving, sacrificing, praying together, comforting, caring for and supporting one another. These experiences make real what it means to be a church.³⁴

³³ Ian Knox, *Theology for teachers*, (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2011), 247.

³⁴ Jose de Mesa and Rebecca Cacho, *Becoming Church, Being Sacrament* (Quezon City: C& E Publications, Inc., 2017), 159-160.

DIAKONIA

The term *diakonia* is taken from the Greek verb *diakonein* (meaning to serve) which implies "responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people."³⁵ Such ministry is based on Jesus' own example and teachings on being a servant to all (see Jn. 13:1-17). It was formally established in the early Christian household churches as they attended to the needs of their members who were poor or became widows and as such would not have the capacity to provide for their children. As household of God, they would contribute to the "treasury" of the churches so that deacons could minister to the needs of the most vulnerable members of the community. It was said that they even sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds according to the needs of the household churches (see Acts 2:45-47).

Service is at the heart of being church. Jesus' way is humble service which he urged all those who follow him to take seriously is essential to proclaiming the Gospel. For Jesus, power must be used to extend genuine support and true care for the well-being of those under one's jurisdiction. Instead of "lording" it over those who rely on us, we should be servant leaders who reach out to the needy with compassion and active love (Mk. 10:42-45).³⁶ This may entail sacrifice or walking an extra mile so to speak. Jesus' way of serving entails a selfless act of charity to the most vulnerable or needy brothers or sisters. This means prioritizing the needs of others before one's self. It may even require "stooping down" so to speak, to meet the needs of the lowly and the most vulnerable. Paul's letter to the Philippians beautifully described the way of service that Jesus exemplified. "Jesus is the paradigm of genuine spiritual progress:

³⁵ Teresa Joan White, "Diakonia" *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* published jointly by the World Council of Churches and the Wm. Eerdmans in 2002, accessed September 16, 2021, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/diakonia>.

³⁶ de Mesa and Cacho, *Becoming church...*, 173-174.

not a self-aggrandizing struggle for supremacy, but a deep love for God and neighbor shown in deeds of service.”³⁷

The best school for this way of serving is found in our own households. Our parents show us how selfless love and generous sacrifice ensure the well-being of every member of the household. Think of how they provide for our needs through hard work and setting aside of their own desires; foregoing their happiness to make sure we are sustained and properly nurtured. As brothers and sisters, we also share in this way of relating with one another as we take on responsibilities in the family. We learn how to care for one another; take part in the tasks to be accomplished at home; and simply do our duties well as part of the family. Being generous to share and staying patient with each other’s weaknesses will teach us how to relate humbly within and outside our household. “We are humanized and socialized fundamentally within the family. It is there where we are taught how to be human together with others and as individual person.”³⁸

With the onset of globalization, the prevailing culture of exclusion, competition and apathy has affected even the family. We often hear of married couples or children and siblings who succumb to indifference or lack of sensitivity to the situation or needs of the members of the family. Instead of genuine intimacy, pride gets in the way of reconciliation and feeds on the ego of everyone which often results to alienation and even hostility. This is made worse by frequent conflicts, lack of open communication, and individualistic attitudes that prevail in the household. It is no wonder that many would breakdown and separate. The vision of a family where life-giving relationships abound is oriented towards the kingdom of God. This means that without an experience of unconditional and gracious kindness in the family, people would not have the motivation to reach out to others in the same sense of inclusivity and authentic concern for their neighbor’s welfare.

Human beings were not created to be isolated from one another but to form relationships where unity and solidarity may

³⁷ “10 Key Bible Verses on Serving,” accessed September 18, 2021, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-key-bible-verses-on-serving/>.

³⁸ Jose de Mesa, “Re-rooting mission in the family,” in *A Theological Reader*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2016), 240.

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be sustained. It is through the family that such experience may become possible. As a church, the first act of service we could guarantee society is permeating our relationships with love that is committed to the good of one another. This promotes the building up of inclusive communities which are united by God's Spirit who wills greater solidarity among people. "Thus, she shows the world that an authentic union, social and external, results from a union of minds and hearts, namely from that faith and charity by which her own unity is unbreakably rooted in the Holy Spirit."³⁹

There are many ways by which the family as church can reach out to those in need and pave the way for true solidarity in society. According to theologian, Jose de Mesa, hospitality when taken seriously as a praxis of the kingdom could have the potential to respond to the problem of indifference, exclusivity, and alienation prevalent in society. This practice was popular among household churches in the New Testament (see Rom. 12:13) as they welcomed and accepted one another into the community of disciples. "Being a home for its members, the family is to become a home to others as well. It will open not only its doors for sisters and brothers in need but more so its heart. Hospitality is welcoming and making room for others within our midst, that is, being actively concerned with them and making room for them in our lives..."⁴⁰ Filipino families are known for being hospitable; a trait that even foreigners affirm based on their experience when they come to the country. Here, we are reminded of our connection with one another because the other person is not a stranger but a fellow human (*kapwa-tao*), a neighbor (*kapitbahay*), or even a sibling (*kapatid*) who is part of God's family.⁴¹

Hospitality can help us open our hearts to the majority of people who are excluded and pushed at the margins of society. Just as Jesus accepted the lost, the least and the weakest, we as part of God's family are called to assume the same attitude of compassion, inclusivity, and solidarity with the rejected and neglected. Is this not something we learn from our families? This implies working

³⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, art. #42, accessed October 27, 2021 [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/sl) documents/sl.

⁴⁰ de Mesa, "Re-rooting mission...", 245.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 246.

hard to make sure that structures of injustice that oppress and take advantage of our brothers and sisters are discarded to bring in more humane systems in society where everyone is welcomed and given the opportunity to live with dignity. While personal change is important, structural conversion is necessary to pave the way for a true family spirit to prevail in our society such that no one is left behind.

It is interesting that the households became the ground of reception for the good news proclaimed to the Gentile families (non- Jewish families) as could be gleaned from Luke-Acts narratives. The Christian faith spread literally from “house to house” (Acts 20:20) where families accepted the new way of life began by Jesus. “The church that grows through household conversions becomes at the same time a worldwide household of faith. It is noteworthy that the gospel spread through the institution of the family, which was politically powerless.”⁴² This points to the influence of the family in a person’s commitment to a specific spirituality or way of life preferred. The family being the scene and focal point of humble service (Greek, *diakonia*) is a potent source of strength and inspiration in our efforts to serve one another. This means being mindful of the needs of family members and responding as best we could to help them. For parents this may entail sleepless nights as they care for their sick child while it may mean for siblings doing the house chores to give their parents time to rest after a tiresome day at work. In other words, any form of generous sharing, assisting those in need, sacrificing one’s wants to give way to a family member’s needs/happiness or any gesture of extending help will suffuse us to what it means to serve humbly and from the heart. To give with gladness without expecting any return of favor is indeed what true service occasions. St. Paul describes our call this way: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interests of others,” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Humility is taught to us through our family relations and encounters with the members of the household. It means being

⁴² Ibid, 247.

able to check one's pride and arrogance which may drive people away. Among Filipinos, the opposite of being humble, that is, "mayabang" (arrogant) or "hambog" (being show off) is a despicable behavior which is often shunned and despised. Children are taught the value of humility as an essential aspect of being accorded respect and trust by people around them. Likewise, one will notice that one of the causes of fights and painful separations in the family would be pride and arrogance among the members. Unless one will initiate humbly a way to reach out to the other would conflicts or disagreements be resolved. Humility is the behavior that best sustains good relationships because it defuses pride and the damage it can inflict in relationships. Humble service occurs when we acknowledge that we are the instruments of service and exert efforts to lower our pride for the well-being of the one we serve.

MARTURIA

While it was true that the Greek word *marturia* which means to witness, testify, or give an account of, was initially attributed to martyrdom of those persecuted Christians during first century church,⁴³ today's *marturia* is more focused on *living the faith* rather than dying for the faith. The shift in the way of witness or testimony did not alter the heart of one's share in the mission of becoming sacraments of the kingdom in our time. It continues to reiterate the necessity of praxis of one's faith with all the ethical implications of being a household of God. James strongly declared that faith without works is dead (see James 2:26) which clearly enunciates that being a Christian is first and foremost a lifestyle; a way of life that is visible or tangible in the kind of relationships we have. When one embraces the Christian faith, Peter admonishes the believer to be mindful of this essential mark of discipleship, "now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart," (1 Pet. 1:22).

⁴³ "Marturia," in *Strong's Concordance*, 3141, accessed September 2, 2021, <https://biblehub.com/greek/3141.htm>.

The church as sacrament of the kingdom of God was emphasized by Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) when it declared, “since the Church is in Christ like *a sacrament* or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission,” (LG, art. #1). God’s saving love is realized and incarnated in the household when we witness to a life of love patterned after the way of Jesus.

The doctrine of incarnation (becoming flesh of God in Jesus)⁴⁴ is the best example of this sacramental reality that has permeated the faith of the Christians. We believe that Jesus is the sacrament of God because he embodied the very person of God (see Jn. 1:1) and has shown us the face of the invisible God (see Col. 1:15). In him, God’s offer of life in its fullness has been fulfilled (see Jn. 10:10) and the salvation intended by God for the whole of creation was realized (see Jn. 3:16). As disciples of Jesus, we are sharers in this ministry of allowing the kingdom of God to flourish in our midst. Did he not instruct us to go to villages and be a witness of the coming kingdom as we heal the sick and bring peace to their homes (see Lk. 10:1-19)?

Today, how can households with the landscape of death-dealing situations embody the life-giving message of the Gospel? Our witness as one household of God is entrenched in our experiences of acceptance, compassion, care, forgiveness, sharing, commitment, healing, nurturing, etc., which beckon us to exemplify in our way of life as we testify with our own lives to the wonder of God’s unparalleled love revealed in our family. As Pope Francis suggests, “in all families, the Good News needs to resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way. All of us should be able to say, thanks to the experience of our life in the family: ‘we come to believe in the love God has for us’ (1 Jn. 4:16).”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “Incarnation,” in *Britannica*, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Incarnation-Jesus-Christ>.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2016), 219.

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