

# Catholic

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PUBLICATIONS  
ONE LIGUORI DRIVE  
LIGUORI, MO  
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WWW.LIGUORI.ORG

C1608A

AUGUST 2016

## A CATHOLIC VISION FOR FAMILY LIFE

### CHRISTIAN VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD

BY DR. GREGORY POPCAK

*F*amily life has changed radically over the past few decades, and there's no denying that Catholics have been caught up in the cultural whirlwind. Our current culture isn't only unreceptive to the Church's views on marriage and family life, but it often also condemns them as oppressive, discriminatory, outdated, undesirable, and impossible to live up to. In this climate, it's important for us to ask—and answer—for ourselves and our world:

- *Can the Catholic vision of family life remain relevant in the world today?*
- *Can we hold on to a Catholic vision of family life in the midst of the cultural storm that's raging against family life as a whole?*

### Prophetic Mission

The answer to these questions is a resounding yes! Catholic families must learn to assert their unique identity as prophetic witnesses and live that identity more boldly, courageously, and grace-fully than ever before! Our social context has changed, but our mission has not. God still calls all people to himself, and he uses the radical witness of the Catholic family to do it.

Even intact, faithful families are negatively affected by our cultural situation. For the most part, family life has been redefined as a collection of individuals living under the same roof and sharing a data plan. Even so-called "normal" families struggle under the weight of the cultural expectation that extracurricular activities should now provide



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EDITOR: JOAN MCKAMEY • DESIGNER: LORENA MITRE JIMENEZ

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the socialization and sense of meaning that family life used to impart. Parents and children of even the healthiest families are tempted to pursue activities such as work, sports, and technology over emotional and spiritual intimacy through family dinners, family time, and family prayer and worship.

## Clarifying the Vision

So what is this unique, positive vision of family life the Church offers the world? In *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II presents something of a mission statement for Catholic families. Families are called to ground their lives in the pursuit of “authentic freedom, actualized in the sincere gift of self” and to cultivate, in all their interactions, “respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial openness, dialogue, generous service, solidarity and all the other values which help people to live life as a gift” (92).

Imagine the powerful impact such a family could have on each other and on those who encounter them! It’s tempting to say that these ideals are too lofty, but that would be missing the point. True, only Christ can accomplish this vision in our lives, but our pursuit of this vision is stunning enough for the world to take notice. Encountering Christians who believe in this vision of love enough to allow it to form the way they live their lives as husbands, wives, parents, and children through good times and bad, sickness and health, wealth and poverty is transformational.

## Five ‘Marks’

How do Catholic families put this vision into practice? I suggest that the Catholic family must be known by following five “marks.” While this list isn’t exhaustive, these five traits will empower families to live the Catholic difference in their daily lives.

**1. Worship Together:** The Eucharist is the source of our love and the sign of the intimacy to which we’re called. Therefore, as a family, we attend Mass together on Sundays and holy days (and at other times as we’re able) and actively participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

As part of this participation, we recognize that we struggle to be the loving communities we’re called to be. Therefore, as a family, we regularly go to confession (recommended monthly) to seek God’s healing and grace so we might better live his vision of love in our lives and homes.

### 2. Pray Together:

The Church refers to the family as “the domestic church” because family life is where the faith is supposed to

be lived out every day (Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 11). Catholic families are called to love each other not only with their human love, but also with the love that flows from God’s own heart. As Catholic families, we recognize that we cannot love one another as God loves us unless we ask him—together—to teach us what this means. Therefore, in addition to individual prayer and parish liturgy, we gather as husband and wife and also as a family for prayer each day.

Praying in an honest, heartfelt manner that leads to deeper intimacy with God and each other, use these opportunities to

- Praise and thank God for his blessings.
- Ask forgiveness for the times you didn’t love God and each other as you ought.
- Ask God for the grace to love each other and the world better.
- Seek God’s will for your life.
- Pray for your needs and those of the family of God.

**3. Be Open and Loving:** Families are schools of love (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1657) where we learn to love God and each other with our whole hearts, minds, souls, and strength. As a family, we constantly challenge ourselves to discover new ways to be even more open with and loving to each other as husband and wife, parents and children.



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“The Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes.”

—Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love*, 315

Children are a visible sign of the loving union between husband and wife. We’re called to make this a reality in our homes both in our openness to life and by working hard on the quality of our relationships with each other.

We cultivate marriage and parenting practices that help each member of the family willingly open up to one another.

These practices encourage family members to freely give themselves to create a deeper community of love and to practice the virtues that help us live life as a gift. Some of these practices include

- Choosing loving-guidance approaches to discipline that focus on teaching and rewarding good behavior and virtues as opposed to more negative and reactive approaches that simply punish bad behavior.
- Scheduling regular one-on-one time with each family member so that we can get to know each other’s thoughts, feelings, and desires on the deepest level possible.
- Taking an active interest in all the things that each family member finds true, good, and beautiful even when that interest doesn’t come naturally to us.

**4. Put Family First:** We recognize that—because our family relationships are the primary vehicle God uses to perfect us and challenge us to become everything we were created to be—family life is the most important activity in our week. To protect the intimacy we’re called to cultivate as the domestic church, we recognize the importance of regular family rituals that promote opportunities to work, play, talk, and pray together and we’re intentional about creating and protecting those activities. We hold these activities as sacred rituals of the domestic church and value them over all other activities that compete with them.

## CALL THE WORLD TO CHRIST

In his opening address at the 2013 World Youth Day, Pope Francis called the faithful to “make a fuss,” that is, to challenge the established order in an intentional effort to call the world to Christ. That’s exactly what a family dedicated to living the five “marks of a Catholic family” will do.

You’re working diligently each day to live out these principles and challenge the world’s impoverished assumptions about family life through such simple actions as inviting friends to your home for dinner, going out to shop for groceries, or attending a school event. Your family can become a prophetic witness, calling the world to Christ by virtue of the love that dwells in your hearts and home.

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If you’re working to build more family time into your weekly schedule, try

- family dinners;
- time for family prayer and worship;
- a game night or family day; and
- scheduled time for communication and relationship building.

**5. Be Witness and Sign:** God wants to change the world through our families. We allow ourselves to be part of his plan for changing the world in two ways. First, by striving to exhibit the closeness, love, and intimacy that every human heart longs for. We must show the world that this love is a possibility worth striving for and should be shown in good times and bad, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer.

Second, we carry this love outside the home by serving the world-at-large in a manner that’s responsible and respectful of the integrity of our family relationships. We do this by committing ourselves and our families to the intentional practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy within the home and outside of it. To this end, the ways we, as a family, are trying to fulfill this responsibility will be a regular topic of conversation in our homes.

## DIG DEEPER

**Look:** How are the cultural shifts affecting families reflected in your own family?

**Judge:** What challenges does your family face in its effort to live your faith?

**Act:** What can you do to become a better witness of Christ’s love to your family?





## Needed: Your Catholic Family

The Church needs such families. The world needs such families. With God's grace, *yours* can be the kind of family that draws others to Christ through your loving example, not because you have achieved perfection (or are good at pretending that you have), but because you're willing to sit at the feet of the Master and learn to care for each other with the love that comes from God's own heart. It's my prayer that as you practice the steps of God's love in your family,

your witness will inspire those you meet to discover your "secret," which is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself.

*Editor's note: This article is pulled from the award-winning book *Family, the Church, and the Real World* (Liguori Publications, 2016).*

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# FAMILY LIFE, THEN AND NOW



## Then

Throughout the 1950s–60s, Catholic families, like nearly 80 percent of all American families, were

predominantly traditional in structure: a father served as the primary breadwinner, and the mother stayed at home. Through the early 1970s, the divorce rate was lower than 25 percent. Cohabitation rates were as low as 1 percent. On average, parents had about four children, and fewer than 5 percent of children were born out of wedlock. Through the late 1960s, about 62 percent of Catholics attended Mass weekly.

## Now

About 48 percent of women have cohabited with a boyfriend before marrying their current spouse. The divorce rate for Catholics is similar to the general population's—between 40 and 50 percent, but Catholic couples who attend Mass exhibit much greater marital stability (the divorce rate for weekly Mass attendees is 5–15 percent). Unfortunately, only 20 percent of Catholics attend Mass weekly.

The size of today's average family has shrunk 50 percent to about two children. Roughly 41 percent of all children are now born to unmarried women, and 44 percent of children have a step-sibling. In general, parents today are older, with many women delaying childbearing until their 30s. Because of both increased work opportunities for women and economic necessity, 70 percent of mothers now work outside the home.



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in the Family  
by James  
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## KEEP THE FAITH



*Family, the Church, and the Real World*, offers inspiration from Scripture and modern advice that does more than just tell you how family life is "supposed" to be. This book gives real, practical wisdom for navigating the holy messiness of family life. You'll discover that Catholic Church teaching on marriage and family is rooted in our ultimate calling—to love with all we can muster, even through those messy moments. 144 pages • 826207

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