

Catholic Review Column: The Church in the Home

Growing up in New Albany, Ind., during the 1950s, I never heard the term “domestic church,” but I knew what it meant. I knew it because my parents and my friends’ parents made their homes domestic churches, even before that phrase from our Catholic tradition was retrieved during the Second Vatican Council. I guess you could say that my childhood friends and neighbors were at home in church and in church at home.

But what did it mean in practical terms that we experienced the family as a domestic church? For one thing, it meant that nearly every Catholic family we knew went to Mass each Sunday.

When the Knights of Columbus volunteered for a parish project, the pastor, Father Wagner, rolled up his sleeves and worked right alongside them. I’ll never forget seeing him on a ladder in a white shirt putting up ceiling tiles.

There was also a strong women’s group called the “Madonna Circle” that prayed, took care of the altar, volunteered and published a wonderful cookbook. My mother still has hers and a special rolling pin used for my favorite recipe: German Christmas cookies called Springerles.

The preaching was also practical, and often family-centered. Families were encouraged to have an Advent wreath in their homes each year, to pray the rosary every evening and to come to Mass on weekdays when possible. Almost every Saturday there were long lines of parishioners for confession.

The point here is not to idealize the past, but to learn from it. The parish was the center of our lives in past generations. We felt at home in the church, and because of that our homes had a “church-like” quality. We had arguments and dilemmas, moments of joy and sorrow. Through it all, though, there was never a time when the faith we professed and celebrated on Sunday didn’t impact our lives.

The most evident “church-like” quality of my family’s home was prayer. We were

hardly living in a monastery, but we did pray the morning offering, prayers before bedtime, prayers before meals, and most evenings we prayed the rosary.

It was also expected that students at my parish elementary school study the Baltimore Catechism and Bible history. Many evenings, my parents patiently helped me to memorize my catechism lessons. They made sure I knew the fundamentals of the faith. After my confirmation in the fourth grade, I began to speak about my desire to become a priest. Mom and Dad encouraged but never pressured me. The unspoken assumption was that the home was where children were supposed to discover what God wanted them to do with their lives.

It was in life's daily events that I was taught the importance of honesty, fair play and self-control. I was not always the willing recipient of these lessons, but thank goodness my parents persevered.

While our home was church-like because of prayer, religious instruction and moral formation, the most church-like quality of all was love. Love in good times and in bad - a sacrificial love to the very end. After 67 years of marriage, the commitment that my parents made to the Lord and to each other continues to this day.

The world has changed dramatically since I was a child. But the fundamental need for children to have a mother and father who love each other and who are faithful to the Lord, the church and each other remains unchanged. Families still need to feel at home in their parish church and welcome its influence into their home. Families still need to go to confession, pray at home, and go to Mass on Sunday. Moms and dads still need to open the hearts of their children to Jesus and oversee their religious instruction. No one can model love and teach moral virtue better than one's parents. They have been given the sacred duty to pass the faith from one generation to the next.