

# 5 takeaways for families on the 40th anniversary of John Paul II's 'Familiaris Consortio'

It's not a stretch to say that the writings of Pope St. John Paul II can fill a library.

But for us, one slender volume stands out in a sweeping 26-year pontificate that saw 14 encyclicals, 16 books and thousands of homilies, speeches and addresses. Celebrating 40 years this Nov. 22, the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* ("The Community of the Family") was characterized by papal biographer George Weigel as one of St. John Paul II's "personal favorites."

[\*Familiaris Consortio\*](#), issued Nov. 22, 1981, has been called a plan of action, a road map and strategy for the Christian family; it is also a forerunner to Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"). This quick read (three hours, give or take) is not only our personal favorite from the saint; it's a bracing vision that explodes with insights and strategies for the challenges every Christian family faces today.

The following is a list of five takeaways that we hope will inspire you to sit down and read the full document – one that might just become one of your personal favorites as well.

## 1. Your example is where everything starts

"The future of humanity passes by way of the family," wrote Pope St. John Paul II (No. 75). By extension, the future of

your family passes by way of ... yes, your own personal example.

Do our children see us as parents who are leading them consistently and lovingly in prayer? “Only by praying together with their children,” John Paul II writes in a striking passage, “can a father and mother – exercising their royal priesthood – penetrate the innermost depths of their children’s hearts and leave an impression that the future events in their lives will not be able to efface” (No. 60).

When life gets difficult – when the inevitable temptations and hardships are encountered by our children – will the “innermost depths” of their hearts bear a permanent, convincing impression of God’s tender care for his people and of our faithfulness in mirroring that care for our children? Please God, yes!

## **2. You can’t outsource your role as primary educator and first herald**

“You have asked to have your children baptized,” we heard from the priest at the baptism of each of our children. “In so doing, you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practice of the Faith. ... Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?” “We do,” we answered as parents.

But then what?

Nature abhors a vacuum, and sadly, too many parents today have – through whatever combination of woundedness, neglect and distraction – created a vacuum of authority and formation.

*Familiaris Consortio* is a wake-up call that no, we are not primarily our children’s chauffeur for curbside drop-off at CCD or Catholic school. In fact, we are the “first and foremost educators” and “first heralds of the Gospel” of our families, which St. John Paul II calls “the first and vital

cell of society," "a school of humanity," an "educating community," "the first school of the social virtues," and a "society in its own original right."

### **3. Your family is a 'Little Trinity'**

"Families, become what you are," John Paul II writes. The family, he continues, is the "living image of God," "a communion of persons."

To a culture that has forgotten the blueprint for the family, *Familiaris Consortio* invites us back to the Holy Trinity. Our family is a little icon or image of the Trinity. If each person of the Trinity is focused not on himself, not on material things, but on others, then our family is called to image this other-centered, "self-giving" way of life. As St. John Paul II writes, the "experience of communion and sharing should characterize the family's daily life." "As a community of love," he writes, "it finds in self-giving the law that guides it and makes it grow" (No. 37).

Becoming who we are as families, *Familiaris Consortio* reminds us, means a constant turning toward the Trinity in our daily life.

### **4. Your family is a 'Little Church'**

If we're honest, we know that our culture defaults to a thin, reductionist view of "home" as a place to drop our stuff before we run off to the next activity. Our homes easily slip into "entertainment centers" where each member of the family pursues his or her own individual interests.

*Familiaris Consortio* instead outlines the vision for the family's "church in miniature" or "domestic church." "The dignity and responsibility of the Christian family as the domestic church," St. John Paul II writes, "can be achieved only with God's unceasing aid, which will surely be granted if

it is humbly and trustingly petitioned in prayer” (No. 59).

Like a majestic cathedral, our homes ought to offer our children an immersive experience in the Faith. A beautiful home altar or prayer corner, icons, a crucifix – these and other visuals, suffused in “a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God,” will help to deepen our families’ “fidelity and intensity of prayer” and “actual participation in the mission of the Church” (No. 62).

## **5. Your family is on mission**

If our family is a “communion of persons,” an image of the Trinity, and a “domestic church,” then it only follows that we have been entrusted with what St. John Paul II calls a “missionary task.”

“The future of evangelization,” he writes, “depends in great part on the Church of the home” (No. 52). No pressure, Mom and Dad! By “radiating the joy of love” and the “certainty of the hope for which it must give an account,” he writes, “the Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come” (No. 52).

St. Joseph, Pillar of Families, pray for us! St. John Paul II, pray for us!

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