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SALT OF THE EMPIRE

The Role of the Christian Family in Evangelization

by *Mike Aquilina*

Years ago, I came across a children's book that told the history of the early Church in small words and large, brightly colored pictures. The first few centuries were pretty much distilled into a few pages with a simple message, which I'll summarize here:

The wicked Roman Empire prevailed for a long time, killing Christians by the thousands, till one day the pagan emperor Constantine was crossing a bridge. He looked up into the sky and saw a cross in the clouds and he heard a voice saying, "By this sign, you shall conquer." So Constantine became a believer, and from that moment on the Roman Empire was a Christian Empire. The End.

If only evangelization were that simple. If only God would always make the gospel immediately relevant by raising a huge cross in the sky and thundering a command from above. If only he would transform *our* culture by the miraculous conversion of its most influential leaders, starting with the emperors of politics and culture.

The truth, however, is that the Christianizing of the Roman Empire after Constantine was a messy affair—perhaps messier than it had been before, during the almost three centuries of

persecution. The Eastern and Western lands went about the work of Christianizing in radically different ways; nasty disputes arose over the relationship between throne and altar; a rift appeared between East and West, which would eventually leave the Eastern peoples vulnerable to the rise of Islam and ultimately widen into a schism that tragically split the Church in two.

So much for the storybook ending of a Christian empire. Yet the truth about the early Christians is more exciting, more instructive, and even more miraculous than the storybooks convey. It is a story not so much about emperors and armies as about families and how they changed the world.

Astonishing Growth

The truth is that, by the time Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity in 313, the empire was already heavily Christianized. By the year 300 perhaps 10 percent of the people were Christians, and by the middle of the century, Christians may well have been a majority of the citizens, 33 million Christians in an empire of 60 million people. So Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it. His edict of toleration was overdue recognition that the Church had already won the empire. We were already in the majority.

These were not 33 million “nominal” Christians—not 33 million “cafeteria Catholics” and “chaplain to the culture” Protestants. They could not be. They did not have the luxury of being lukewarm. In the decade before Constantine's edict, the Church had suffered its most ruthless and systematic persecution ever under the emperor Diocletian and his successors. The practice of the faith was, in many places, punished by torture and death. In many places, to live as a Christian meant, at the least, to accept social stigma and humiliation. What is more, the Christian way itself was characterized by demanding disciplines in the life of prayer and in the moral life.

To be a Christian was not easy in the year 300. It cost something. Whether or not you were martyred, you had to pay with your life. Christians were laying their lives on the line every time they attended the liturgy, and they continued to do so through the course of every day.

Yet the rate of conversion throughout the empire—beginning with the first Christians, long before Constantine—was most remarkable. A few years ago, an eminent sociologist, Rodney Stark of the University of Washington, set out to track church growth in the ancient world. He gathered his findings in *The Rise of Christianity*. Dr. Stark is not a Christian and had no vested interest in making Christianity look good.

What Stark found in his study of the first Christian centuries was an astonishing growth rate

of 40 percent per decade. Again, Constantine gets no credit for this growth. Most of it happened in the years before he was born. In fact, even though conversions were coerced at various times after the year 380, the Church never again witnessed the kind of growth that took place when conversions were costly.

Stark holds that most growth came from individual conversions, and not only from the poor, but also from the merchant and upper classes. He argues that most converts were women, that women benefited greatly from conversion, and that some women—though never ordained to the priesthood—were influential leaders. Using historical data and sociological methods, he argues that the Christian population grew by 40 percent a decade, from about 1,000 Christians in the year 40 to 7,530 in 100 to a little over six million in 300 and 33 million in 350—growing, in the hundred years between 250 and 350, from about two percent of the population to slightly over half.

Misery & Fewer Girls

Stark vividly describes the misery of ordinary citizens in the cities of the pagan world. All but the rich lived in cramped, smoky tenements—one family to a small room, with no ventilation or plumbing—which frequently collapsed or burned. The cities were horribly crowded, a city like Antioch having perhaps 200 people per acre, plus livestock (modern Calcutta has only 122 people per acre). Constant immigration meant that the cities were peopled by strangers, with the resulting crime and disorder, so that the streets were not safe at night and families were not even safe in their homes.

Human waste was thrown into open ditches in the middle of the narrow streets, and the cities were smothered in flies attracted by the filth. The corpses of those who died of natural causes were sometimes left to rot in the city's open sewers. ("The stench of these cities must have been overpowering for many miles—especially in warm weather," Stark noted.) Water was hard to get and almost always foul.

Life expectancy was at most around 30 for men and perhaps much lower for women. Hygiene was minimal. Medical care was more dangerous than disease—and disease often disfigured its victims when it did not kill them. The human body was host to countless parasites, and tenements were infested by vermin. For entertainment, people thronged to the circuses to see other people mutilated and killed.

And pagan marriage offered no respite from this misery. Greco-Roman women were usually married off at age 11 or 12, to a mate not of their choosing, who was often much older (Christian girls tended to marry at about 18). Afterward, they suffered in predatory relationships rife with contraception, abortion (which often killed the mother), adultery, and unnatural sexual acts.

Infanticide was common, especially for female or defective offspring. Of the 600 families who show up in the records from ancient Delphi, only six raised more than one daughter. Though most of those 600 families were quite large, they had all routinely killed their baby girls. Stark quotes a letter from a pagan businessman writing home to his pregnant wife. After the usual endearments, he closes his letter by saying, briefly and casually, “If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy, keep it, if a girl, discard it.”

If fewer girls lived to see the second day from their birth, still more died on their way to adulthood. The shortage of women, then, played further havoc on the population growth of the empire, as well as its economy and its morals. Homosexual activity was considered normal for married men.

Attractive Homes

That is the world in which the first Christians were born, in which they grew up and married, and in which they raised their families. You might call it a culture of death.

But Christian marriage and childrearing immediately set Christians apart. According to Stark, Christian husbands and wives genuinely tried to love one another, as their religion required. Their mutual affection and their openness to fertility led to a higher birthrate, and thus to a still higher growth rate for the early Church. They did not abort their children, nor did husbands endanger their wives’ lives by doing so.

The early Christians’ respect for the dignity of marriage made the faith enormously attractive to pagan women. So women made up a disproportionate number of the early converts. This in turn made Christianity enormously attractive to pagan men—who could not find many pagan women to marry, but saw young ladies attending the Christian liturgy in great numbers.

We should not dismiss these benefits of Christianity in the natural order. One thing that the rise of Christianity demonstrated is that faithfulness to the one true God is the best way to happiness, not only in heaven, but also in the world that God created. Christian faith, then as now, makes for happy homes. And, in pagan cultures, then as now, happy homes are very attractive. The evidence seems to indicate that, in the Roman Empire, Christian homes provided the Church’s primary place of evangelization. And that the Church grew because in every place it lived as a family.

This is something we do not find too often in the published lives of the saints, which tend to focus primarily on extraordinary events and great miracles. Nor do we find this story told in ecclesiastical histories, which tend to focus almost exclusively on the lives of the bishops and the clergy. Yet it is the true story of the Church. As St. Augustine put it, the story of the growth of the gospel was the story of “one heart setting another on fire.”

The fire of charity tended in the Christian home soon consumed city blocks and then neighborhoods. It was not the sort of ecstatic experience we see in the account of the first Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. It was, rather, quiet and gradual. Let us look at just one example of how this fire of charity burned.

Epidemics were among the great terrors of life in the ancient world. The physicians in those days knew that the diseases were communicable, but they knew nothing about bacteria or viruses, never mind antibiotics or antisepsis. Once the diseases hit your hometown, there was really no stopping them. Several major epidemics ravaged the empire during the rise of Christianity, and each of them reduced the empire's population by about one-third.

The Fire of Charity

Yet even in these circumstances, the Church grew. In fact, amid simultaneous persecutions and epidemics, the Church grew still more dramatically, especially in proportion to the total population of the empire. Everywhere people were dropping like flies, but the Church was growing.

How did that happen? Look at what ordinarily happened when an epidemic hit your hometown. The first people to leave were usually the doctors. They knew what was coming, and they knew they could do little to prevent it. The second-century pagan physician Galen admits that he fled, in his description of the worldwide epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The next ones to leave were the pagan priests, because they had the means and the freedom to do so.

Ordinary pagan families were encouraged to abandon their homes when family members contracted the plague. Again, they knew no other way to isolate the disease than to leave the afflicted family member behind to die, perhaps slowly.

Yet Christians were duty-bound not to abandon the sick. Jesus himself had said that, in caring for the sick, Christians were caring for him. So, even though Christians knew no more about medicine than the pagans did, they stayed with their family members, friends, and neighbors who were suffering. Consider this account of the great epidemic of the year 260, left to us by Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending their every need and ministering to them in Christ—and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. . . . Death in this form, the result of great piety and strong

faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

We also possess pagan accounts of that epidemic, and all of them are characterized by despair. Yet the Christians were “serenely happy.” Nor was this an extraordinary event. Stark says that Syrian Antioch, considered the second city of the empire, experienced 41 natural and social catastrophes of this order during the years when Christianity was on the rise. That is an average of one cataclysmic disaster every fifteen years.

Christianity had the same effect in other ways, as Stark noted. It offered cities filled with strangers, orphans, widows, the homeless, and the poor a new family and community and a new way of life that freed them from many of the fears that tortured their pagan neighbors.

Amid all that havoc, Christian charity, which usually began in the home, brought church growth. Christians were much more likely to survive epidemics because they cared for one another. Mere comfort care cut the Christians’ mortality rate by two-thirds when compared with the pagans’. What is more, the Christian families cared for their pagan neighbors as well. Thus, the pagans who received Christian care were more likely to survive and, in turn, to become Christians themselves. Thus, in times of epidemic, when populations as a whole plummeted, church growth soared.

The Spreading Flame

The pagans tended only to take care of those in their group. While pagans would only help their brothers, Christians treated all men as their brothers. And the pagans took notice. The wicked emperor Julian, who despised all Christians and led the charge to re-paganize the empire, still had to grudgingly admire their charity: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well. Everyone can see that our poor lack aid from us.”

I cannot emphasize enough that this charitable activity was not so much the work of institutions as of families. The family was then, as it is now, the fundamental unit of the Church. Until the third century, most Christians did not have a building they could call their “church.” Their Christian life was centered in their homes. Institutionalized charitable organizations were still years away in the future, to be established during more peaceful times.

In the beginning, charity was, rather, the way of Christian family life. This routine of charity did not so much constitute a new culture, replacing the old, at least externally. Outwardly, little had changed in the neighborhoods inhabited by Christians. The law, the government, the routines of daily life remained as they were—and as they would largely remain, intact, even after Constantine. But inwardly, everything had changed.

We see the means of this transformation, even very early in Christian history. A document of

the early second century, the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*, describes the process in profound yet simple terms. The writer points out that Christians are not distinguished from other people by anything external: not their country or language, not their food or clothing, but by what he calls the Christians' "wonderful and striking way of life."

They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not commit infanticide. They have a common table, but not a common bed. . . . They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. . . . To sum it up: As the soul is in the body, so Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. . . . The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.

Gradually. Invisibly. But inexorably. This is the way that Christian doctrine, hope, and charity transformed the Roman Empire—one person at a time. Christianity transformed the way neighbors treated the sick, the way parents treated their children, and the way husbands and wives made love.

That is what really happened to the Roman Empire. The gospel of Jesus Christ gradually spread, from person to person, from family to family, from home to home, from neighborhood to neighborhood, then to entire provinces. Conversion took place in the smallest increments, one by one, because of homes.

The Domestic Church

When we read about our ancestors in the faith, their deeds cry out for modern imitation. I will be so bold as to draw out six lessons the ancient Christian families can teach modern families.

1. *Come to see your home as a domestic church.* Modern Christians tend to think of their parish buildings as "the church." We have to believe that our families are the church, that our homes are the church, and that the kingdom of God begins in the place we hang our hats and eat our meals. We need to imitate the early Christians in seeing our homes as places of worship and fellowship, as sources of charity, and as schools of virtue.

St. Augustine once addressed a gathering of fathers as "my dear fellow bishops." That is the role that parents play in the domestic church.

2. *Make your domestic church a haven of charity.* One of the most striking descriptions of the early Church comes from Tertullian, who wrote: "It is our care of the helpless, our practice of

loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents, who say, ‘See those Christians, how they love one another.’” This love has to begin at home. It has to begin in the domestic church.

How many of those who decry the lack of reverence in their churches then go home to desecrate their domestic churches by harsh words toward their children or toward their spouses or by gossip about their neighbors or their co-workers? We will all be called to account for this. Remember the words of Tertullian. They will know we are Christians, not by the icons on our wall, or the fish symbols on our bumper stickers, or the grotto in our front yard, or by our WWJD bracelets, but by the love in our hearts, expressed in our homes.

3. *Make your domestic church a place of prayer.* This does not mean that your day has to be dominated by devotions, but you should have some regular, routine family disciplines of prayer. The early Christians saw this as necessary and so observed “stational hours” of prayer throughout the day—and even throughout the night. In the third century, Tertullian described Christian families in North Africa rising in the middle of every night to pray together.

Most Christians today do not rise at 3 a.m., and I am not suggesting we should. There are many ways to pray as a family, and you should seek out the ways that work best for your tribe. You can pray together at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day. You should pray together, at least, by offering grace at every meal. You can begin a weekly family Bible study. You can join in the weekday worship your parish church offers. The important thing is to do something, start somewhere. Begin with something small and manageable, and then give yourself time to grow into it.

Apostles of Charity

4. *Know that, as a domestic church, you are “on mission.”* Like the universal Church, you are sent by Christ to bring the gospel to the world. You are sent outward from your home. “Sent” is the root meaning of the word *apostolate*, and you and I and all our children are called to share in the Church’s apostolate, to be apostles to the world.

Imagine yourself as one of those invisible Christians living in the ancient cities that were rotting with epidemics. What would you do? What would you have your family do? Would you flee the city while your neighbors died? Would you board up the windows and position your shotgun? You would do as your ancestors did and go out and serve your neighbors.

Nowadays, we can cure many of the ancient plagues. But we should all ask ourselves: What epidemics are consuming the families in our neighborhoods today? What is it that’s tearing the neighbor families apart? What is it that leaves them scarred and barely able to go on in life? How about divorce? Illegitimacy? Abandonment . . . that constant sense that they are not

wanted by someone they dearly love? Perhaps we need to expand our definitions of poverty and epidemic, in order to see the people our families must serve today. There are probably people on your block who are very lonely, elderly and alone, or mourning, or otherwise in need.

How might your family help? Sometimes helping is as simple as making meals, opening the door to your home, even sharing your children's "artwork" for the neighbors' refrigerators. It does not have to be a lavish program. But this sort of charity should be an ongoing family project. Christians sometimes go overboard in shielding their family from strangers and from nonbelievers. But as Mother Teresa said, Christ will sometimes come to us in these distressing disguises. We have to open wide the doors to Christ. That is part of what it means for us to be on mission.

One of the great Fathers of the Western Church, St. Jerome, said: "The eyes of all are turned upon you. Your house is set on a watchtower; your life fixes for others the limits of their self-control." But our lives cannot set limits for others unless we open our lives and our homes to others—and unless (see lessons two and three) we live as if our house was set on a watchtower.

Luminous Grace

5. *Cultivate the virtue of hope.* Divine grace has unlimited power. It can transform persons; it can and has transformed cultures. As parents, as parishioners, and as neighbors, we have to believe in miracles. We have to believe that people can change. It is too easy for us to believe that many people are hopelessly lost, have been by the culture or their own lives irremediably inoculated against the gospel. But this is simply not true. Read the agnostic Rodney Stark: Miracles do happen, people do change, towns and cities and nations can convert to Christianity at the rate of 40 percent per decade.

6. *Live by the teachings of the Church.* We need to raise our homes up to the standards of Jesus Christ and his Church. It is a high standard, but the alternatives today are deadly. The early Christians did not convert the empire by compromising with the empire's ideas of family life. They did not compromise on divorce, contraception, abortion, infanticide, or homosexual activity.

The early Christians hated these sins, even as they passionately loved the sinners who committed these sins—the sinners who lived in their neighborhoods. We, too, need to hate these sins and keep them far from our own homes. But we need also to help other homes, other families to live according to Jesus' teachings. We need to evangelize the families who need us. If we do not, then we can count ourselves with the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who passed by the man in the ditch.

I close not with a quote from the early Christians but from a contemporary Christian, Pope John Paul II, who in *Christifideles Laici* drew a lesson from the early Church as he instructed families in the ways of evangelization:

Animated in its own inner life by missionary zeal, the Church of the home is also called to be a luminous sign of the presence of Christ and of his love for those who are “far away,” for families who do not yet believe, and for those Christian families who no longer live in accordance with the faith that they once received. The Christian family is called to enlighten “by its example and its witness . . . those who seek the truth.”

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