

There's a beautiful blessing that is given to a father at the end of his child's baptism. The blessing reminds the father and the mother that they are the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. Then the prayer begs, "May they also be the best of teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do." This weekend the Archdiocese of New Orleans calls us to celebrate Family Sunday. It's a time for us to remember that the first place where we learn to live the Christian life, the first school of holiness for us is the family.

Pope St. John Paul II very often referred to the family as the domestic church, the assembly of God's people in the home. Within the family is where our faith first comes alive. The family is the place where we first hear the Good News that we have a God who loves us. The family is the place where we first learn to speak to God in prayer.

Our families bring us to the church for baptism, then again for reconciliation. Our families encourage us to receive the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. Our families teach us to live a virtuous life and to know what it means to be holy. This is why God has given us the gifts of families, so that these special relationships can lead us to heaven.

Now, what I'm describing here is the ideal. This is what the Church sets forth for us as the model. This is what all of us would love our families to look like. But often, the life of faith within families can be drowned out by work or activities or other obligations. Sometimes families are broken by separation or divorce or death.

Over and over again, our own sinfulness keeps our families from living up to the ideal, our failures make it difficult for our families to be those places of holiness.

But our sinfulness is nothing new. We can see this among the Apostles in the Gospel today. The Lord, once again, was trying to prepare them for the difficult path that lay ahead in His Passion and His death. Yet, the Apostles were giving in to bickering and pride. As they walked with Jesus, they were arguing about which of them was the greatest. They could not have been more off-track. They couldn't have been further from the humility and service that the Lord was calling them to.

We often do the same thing. The Lord calls us to be faithful disciples and to make our families into schools of holiness, but we disrupt this by our sins. St. James tells us, "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice." How often our family life can be disrupted by jealousy or pride or sin.

Yet notice how the Lord responds to the Apostles. He could have been harsh. He could have upbraided them severely. But instead He is patient. "Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.'"

If we desire our families to be domestic churches, school of holiness where all of us grow closer to the Lord, Jesus gives us the key. Each of us must be the last of all and the servant of all. Imagine a family full of people who always put everyone else first. Imagine a family where every member seeks to be the servant of all.

This is what it means to love - it is to will the good of the beloved. To love is to choose to put the needs of others before my own needs. This is how our families can become schools of holiness.

How can we make our families into communities of selflessness and service? How do we make our families into schools of holiness? I'll offer you three suggestions...

First, make time for family prayer everyday. Decide on a good time when everyone can participate, maybe just before bed, or just before dinner. Spend 10 or 15 minutes. You could let everyone name something that they are thankful for. You could let everyone offer an intention - someone or something that they would like to pray for. Have a time to ask forgiveness if someone has done something to hurt someone else. End with an Our Father or a Hail Mary. However, you structure this, make time for daily prayer as a family.

Second, have some time as a family everyday that is free from electronics. Our culture is addicted to our screens. (And believe me, I'm preaching to myself here too.) I'm always saddened when I go to a restaurant and see everyone at the table on their phones. Take a break everyday so that everyone has time to talk to each other.

Third, have a meal together regularly. This will allow time within the family for real conversation, for friendship, for love.

Making our families into domestic Churches, into schools of holiness will not be easy, but God's grace is there. When we fail, the Lord offers us forgiveness and healing in the sacrament of reconciliation. And we can imitate this forgiveness within our families by being quick to apologize and quick to forgive.

For marriages that are struggling or for families that have suffered the pain of separation or divorce, the church can offer grace and healing there too. Our parish is happy to point you to ministries and activities for those who are struggling in their marriage or for those whose marriage has failed. Our deacons and I stand ready to help if someone wants to seek the healing and the freedom that an annulment can offer. The Lord's grace is present especially in the difficulties of our lives.

God has given us the beautiful realities of marriage and family life to offer us the support we need to be faithful disciples and to help us grow in holiness. Let us work and pray within our families that the Lord will bless them and strengthen them. May our families be schools of holiness that will lead us all toward heaven.