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# FAMILY LIFE IN CHRIST





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# FAMILY LIFE IN CHRIST

by

THERESE MUELLER

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## FAMILY LIFE IN CHRIST

It has been my good fortune to have experienced and actively shared in the attempts to revive the liturgy in both parochial and family life in Germany. I was in close touch with numerous groups of young Catholic fathers and mothers who worked hard to found their families on a thoroughly liturgical basis. In the following pages I shall attempt to describe these efforts and to discuss the possibilities of bringing *home* our religion, that is, of living the liturgy in the family circle.

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“It depends upon the family whether the Church is to be saved in a country or destroyed. The Church as a whole has, it is true, the promise that she will never succumb till the end of time. But this promise is not made to every province of the Church. Whether in a given land the Church is to abide depends not on external things, not even on whether church buildings and convents are destroyed, nor even in the last resort on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but upon this, that the men and women who have administered to one another the sacrament of matrimony, from the grace of this sacrament transform their families into little churches. That—no more, no less—is in this hour the one thing needful.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Schlueter-Hermkes, *The Family*, p. 18.

Thus we understand the urgent call of our time for holy fathers and mothers, for holy families, who will build anew the Christian foundations of a social life that has evidently lost its Christian features. Thus we understand St. Paul's strong emphasis on the "great sacrament" of matrimony, which makes of two natural persons one new supernatural unity incorporated in the mystical body of Christ.

### BAPTISMAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Our Lord instituted two sacraments in order that the Church might grow both in the natural and in the supernatural sphere: matrimony and holy orders. Matrimony and natural procreation are the presupposition of rebirth in baptism. Moreover, in the sacramental union, the Christian father and mother are representatives of God in rearing and training new members of Christ in the spirit of their baptism, and therefore we must admit that for a Christian the day of baptism is far more important than his birthday. Why should we not create a new tradition in a young family—following the example of many saints—of celebrating the baptismal days, especially those of our children, instead of or in addition to the birthdays? This will enable us to remind them year after year in a solemn family gathering of what happened on the day of their rebirth as children of God. The godparents or others who attended the baptism of the child should be present. If the godparents cannot attend, they should at least send a letter. How important were such letters from godparents in the lives of our grandparents and great-grandparents!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Orate Fratres*, Vol. XII (1938), pp. 289-293: "Letters of a Godmother," by Therese Mueller.

From this it also follows that it is essential to choose as godparents for our children persons in whom we have absolute confidence that they understand and willingly undertake the full responsibility involved in this spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

When the children are small, we may tell them of their baptism day in story form. In the case of older children, we should read and explain the actions, symbols and ceremonies of the official baptismal rite. Then together we renew the baptismal vows. The solemn occasion can be brought to a fitting close with the *Te Deum* or some other appropriate song of thanksgiving.

As the Church in her liturgical ceremonies makes the reality she is enacting more impressive and understandable by using visible and palpable things—water, candle, salt, oil, baptismal robe—so we also ought to give the child things that will help remind and impress him. Suitable gifts might, for instance, take the form of a Bible, a small holy water stoup for his room, a book about or by his patron saint. Again, when he is old enough to appreciate such things, he may on the anniversary day be given one of the small garments he wore at baptism, or the letters written for that day. According to the rite, appropriate gifts for baptism are the candle, which the priest hands to the child to represent the light of Christ who comes to live in the baptized, and the white baptismal robe spread over him as a symbol of the innocence and sanctifying grace with which baptism clothes the soul. These should be accompanied by a card containing the prayers recited by the priest in conferring these gifts: "Receive this white garment, which mayest thou wear without stain before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou may-

est have life everlasting. Amen. Receive this burning light, and safeguard thy baptism by a blameless life; keep the commandments of God, that when our Lord shall come to claim His own, thou mayest be worthy to greet Him with all the saints in the heavenly court, and live forever and ever. Amen."

What a splendid tradition, full of profound and ever new meaning, could be started if parents and godparents were to offer such gifts instead of the customary silver spoons, saving account book, or baby clothes!

All these things should be reverently saved and should be shown to the child on each baptismal anniversary, on the day of first holy Communion, and on the occasion of the solemn renewal of baptismal vows in the parish. The candle should, of course, be actually used again on these days. Later, when as grown-up sons and daughters the children leave the house to take their place in society or establish their own family, these gifts should be given to them permanently.

The yearly commemoration of the mystery of baptism within the family circle will never fail to impress all participants. The anniversary could also be made an effective reminder by attending a baptism or by visiting the church where the child was reborn in Christ. On one such trip to the baptismal chapel of our children, it happened that we unexpectedly witnessed the baptism of nine infants. Not only were our own chil-

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<sup>3</sup>In earlier times, however, the silver spoon (or silver mug) had a beautiful Christian significance. Used in the administration of baptism and a gift of the godparent, it was meant to be a lasting remembrance of baptism, and had the figure of the patron saint (or of some apostle, hence "apostle spoon")—Mickey and Minnie Mouse had not yet entered the scene!—engraved on the handle.



dren, though very small, deeply impressed and incited to numerous questions for many days to come, but even we adults felt we had received a special grace from God by this rare experience.

In large sections of the old country, where Catholic tradition reaches back to medieval times, the name-day, the feast of the patron saint to whose care the child was committed at baptism, is celebrated as the anniversary of the baptismal day. Thus, besides serving as a reminder of his baptismal privileges and duties, the celebration impresses on the child the life and work, the struggle and the holiness of the saint whose name he bears, and teaches him to consider how he may follow the example of his patron in his own state and calling. Moreover, also in this country we find people who, faithful to a beautiful tradition brought from eastern Europe, celebrate the feast of the patron saint by means of a voluntary vigil with strict fast, confession and holy Communion, followed by a family feast. Would it not be worth-while to go back a few generations to renew and rediscover religious traditions, which still have—perhaps now more than ever—something vital and beautiful to say to our own times?

#### BRINGING HOME THE SACRAMENTS

We have already discussed the role of baptism in the Christian family life. Let us now briefly consider the remaining sacraments. Of these holy Eucharist is first.

Even a small child should feel at home at the *eucharistic Sacrifice* and should be encouraged to imitate father and mother in going there daily or weekly. Assisting at Mass for the first time—on a holyday or family

feast—should be an impressive event for the little one. The privilege aspect of Mass attendance should be stressed, so that going to church becomes a sublime and memorable experience, something ardently to be desired, as if it were a gift or reward. We should always do whatever we can to maintain this attitude towards the holy Sacrifice.

Then Sunday after Sunday we prepare the child for holy Mass, reminding him of the mystery of the renewal of the death on the cross, the redemption of mankind. We shall always try to find new ways of explaining the parts of the Mass in words adapted to his understanding. We must instil in him a longing to share in the sacrifice, to offer himself, body and soul, in joy and sorrow, life and death, with Christ. We must teach him to become consciously a part of Christ and of His Sacrifice, to be transformed with the bread and wine into Him who is going to offer us with Himself to the Father, and who gives us His flesh and blood, His love and grace in holy Communion.

Soon we can begin to explain the Sunday gospel; for the younger children this can take the form of a "holy story." Later we may add thoughts and instructions from the epistles. In this manner we grow with our children in liturgical understanding until we begin a new tradition, a family practice: on Saturday evenings, when everything is in readiness for the Sunday, when the Church has already begun the Lord's Day with the celebration of First Vespers, we shall spend an hour of quiet and recollection together, disposing our hearts and our minds for Sunday. We may read the text of the next day's Mass, thinking it over and discussing it. If we have at hand an article or a book treat-

ing of the Sunday's liturgy, we may read from it and explain the Church's mind, giving also the little ones an opportunity to ask questions or to say things in their own way. Thus we shall awaken an interest in the life of the Church not only in the children, but the family as a whole will learn to breathe in rhythm with the Christians all over the world.

Later on other ways of attaining the same end will perhaps be found more suitable. For we must be ever ready to accommodate our family life to the specific spiritual needs of our children. I read lately of a mother who every Saturday night put the open missal on the home altar beside the burning vigil light, thus inviting the adult members of her family to prepare themselves spiritually for Sunday.

Of primary importance in the life of the family is the day of our children's *first holy Communion*. From the liturgical standpoint, this is the day when, for the first time, the child may take a complete part in the Mass, which is incomplete for the individual who does not receive holy Communion. The younger the child, the more it is the duty of the parents, especially of the mother, to prepare him for the great event. She is best able and fitted to find the right words to help him realize the magnitude of the gift he is to receive. Mothers should not easily relinquish such a holy and sublime privilege!

In this country priests and nuns in Catholic schools often assume parental rights in the matter of religious education. Parents are glad that they do not need to bother with instructions which these competent persons can provide. And sometimes even priests fail to see that in this way Christian parents become more and more

confirmed in an attitude of indifference and never learn to do their duty.

The experience of Christian parents in some European countries speaks in eloquent language on this matter. For decades they, too, relinquished to the Catholic school as many as possible of their parental rights and duties. They discontinued family morning prayer: for did not the children pray in school? They no longer discussed or talked of religious problems at home: what was the need, since the priest or sisters were teaching in school whatever the children had to know? They did not attend Mass on Sunday as a family: there were school and sodality Masses with different members of the family in different pews and places.

Two or three generations later this irresponsible attitude suddenly found itself facing an abyss—there was no longer any Catholic school education. An awakening followed, and with it a remarkable rebirth of Catholic family life, a renewal of “the Church at home.” Can we not learn from this example instead of waiting for a similar experience?

The less parents have to do in the important matter of religious education, as for instance in the spiritual preparation for the first Communion day, the more will they be concerned with such unimportant details as dress, meals, gifts and amusements. Often enough they help secularize the most important, the most solemn day of a child’s life by making it a kind of show for the family and the neighborhood, a day of much excitement and external festivities. Study of the liturgy will show the way to the right kind of family feast for first Communion.

The climax of the day is, of course, the Communion Mass. But the entire family rejoices as it accompanies one of its members who, for the first time, brings home Christ Himself in his heart. That is the real reason for the family feast. We decorate the house that he may in later years and throughout life be reminded of this holy and happy day. Nor will that purpose be served by giving the children money or trinkets from the "five and ten," worthless or childish things that soon are lost or thrown away. One single worthy gift, perhaps a cross or statue for the home altar, paid for with the help of the whole family circle, means much more for the first Communion feast as well as for later life than all the things we are now accustomed to give or frequently find offered commercially for such occasions.

We shall have to spend hours to work out a new and suitable kind of celebration: solemn, reverential, and joyful, considering the child and not the grownups as the central point. It should, however, include a family thanksgiving with perhaps a "Glory Be to God on High" or a "Holy God We Praise Thy Name" immediately after coming from church, and another reunion of the family at the home altar at night.

There are two other sacraments that should hold a similar place in the memory of the Christian: *first confession and confirmation*. It is regrettable that these are not properly celebrated and sufficiently remembered, since both inaugurate a new period of religious or grace life. Every effort should be made by the family to make these days "holy days" in the true meaning of the word, introducing the child to the significance of the ceremonies, the prayers, and the character of the sacraments.

That is only possible if we parents prepare for these days ourselves by study and prayer. Can we do too much to enable our children to become earnest and steadfast Christians? Such efforts will moreover give parents a much deeper understanding of their religion and will draw them into more intimate relations with their children.

Confirmation especially, as the sacrament of holy ordination for the laity, ought to receive far more attention than it does. Since it signifies a spiritual coming of age, the family should in some manner take cognizance of that fact. Perhaps the child on that day can be given his own room, or desk, or the care of the home altar; or the articles used at his baptism, such as the candle or garment, might be presented him permanently. Or it may be the time to present a much prized watch, reminding him that from now on he is responsible for the use or abuse of his time, that he has to learn punctuality and trustworthiness as the most important virtues of a soldier of Christ.

*Wedding anniversaries* in a Catholic home are also primarily religious feasts and are most fittingly observed by family attendance at Mass and family reception of holy Communion. They offer a good opportunity also to talk to the children about the liturgy and character of matrimony, about the wedding Mass and the nuptial blessing. And if our adolescents learn that the Church has prepared a rite even for the engagement to marriage, thereby elevating this extremely secularized event into the sacred sphere of liturgical blessing, it may guard them against some of the dangers that ordinarily threaten. If year after year we repeat for them the beautiful prayers of the blessing of the wedding ring, there will

grow in them a clear understanding of the fact that the importance of the ring has nothing to do with the price or size of the diamond. If, moreover, the young woman is familiar with the profound meaning of the nuptial blessing, she will not easily forget the reverent attitude of the Church towards the high dignity of the bride and her vocation to Christian motherhood. Nor will the young man fail to respect deeply this dignity in the girl since he knows how highly it is esteemed by the Church. Can we hear too often that matrimony was enriched with a blessing "which neither the punishment of original sin nor the curse of the deluge availed to abolish"? The mother with her hard burden will never feel deserted by Mother Church; and even the aged couple, repeating the liturgical prayers of their wedding day on its anniversaries, will experience anew the holy mystery of their being two in one "in Christ and in the Church."

Thus prepared and filled with the spirit and concept of the holy mystery of matrimony, we shall not be tempted—whenever a wedding occurs in our family—to cover up and hide the marvelous spiritual significance of this day behind the screen of secular etiquette or "society ceremonial," so dictatorial, so compulsory, so absurdly punctilious with regard to accidentals that no time remains to concentrate on the essential. The more pomp and "show," the less opportunity there is for the sacramental dignity to manifest itself at the wedding feast.

The sacrament of *Holy Orders*. We have already indicated the close connection between the sacraments of matrimony and Holy Orders, both of which are social sacraments. Therefore there is a relation between

the Christian family and the priesthood. We find that too many who regard themselves as good Catholics are not conscious of this relation; they seem to think that Holy Orders have meaning only for priests and priests-to-be. Let us consider what would happen if there were no priests with the apostolic power to bind and loose, to offer sacrifice, to consecrate, to bless—and then let us thank and praise God for this great gift!

Four times in the course of the liturgical year, at the very beginning of each season of the natural year, Mother Church invites *all* her children to be present—at least spiritually—at the holy Sacrifice during which ordinations are conferred, that is, on the Ember Saturdays. On these days the father should talk to his family about the sacramental dignity and holiness of the episcopate and priesthood, the spiritual fatherhood, the mystery of the ordained representative of Christ. In our family prayers we ought to remember the bishop of our diocese, the priests of our parish and of all the parishes we ever belonged to, the priests who taught us and who teach our children, the priests of the entire Church, and last but certainly not least, all those who are called to become priests and who are preparing for that high calling, that the Holy Ghost may live and work in them and with them for the sake of the coming kingdom of Christ and that He may lead them to an eternal reward in heaven.

If we should have the opportunity of witnessing an ordination service in the cathedral church, we ought to bring any sacrifice to give ourselves and our children this great liturgical experience; it cannot help influencing our whole attitude toward the representative of Christ.



Finally, the sacrament of *extreme unction* ought also to be known by the family. On All Souls day or on the anniversary of a death in our family we may prepare a table for administering the last anointing, pray and explain the rite of extreme unction, and say the prayers for the dying, offering them for a person dying without the priest or for any member of the family who may die a sudden death.

When thus instructing our children about the "last things of man," we might also tell them about our own last wishes, about our most beloved psalms or hymns which we would like to have prayed at our deathbed, about the place where we keep the blessed candles, and about the cloth we have prepared for covering our hands at the last Communion and our face when all is over.

It is to be understood that on all our family holy-days the entire family begin festivities with holy Mass. The children should see their parents kneeling and praying together, going to Communion together. They should have a vivid recollection of father and mother praying at home. I shall never forget my own father attending holy Mass on Sundays, though he died years ago. And I always have in mind the devotion and contemplation of my mother kneeling in church or praying at home. We, too, owe such memories to our children so that they will not forget our example. Nowadays it is almost exceptional that the family comes as a group to the holy Sacrifice. That is regrettable. It is not the best practice for children to be always in the school-pews in church and for fathers and mothers to be in special benches. Family worship strengthens family ties, and frequent family days in our parishes would help to achieve this end.

## THE LITURGICAL YEAR IN THE HOME

Another and very important sphere of liturgical life for the family is the cycle of the ecclesiastical year. It makes present to us the mysteries of our election, redemption and sanctification and makes us more fully understand, love and live them. So it is essential that not only each member of the family but the family as a unit, as "the Church in miniature," follow the Church in the way she suggests for a richer living of the liturgical life.

*Advent.* This holy season symbolizes for the Christian the time during which the chosen people waited for their Redeemer. Think of them suffering in darkness, conscious of their sins and longing intensely for salvation! And even as they prayed and prepared themselves for the Advent in flesh, so we should look forward to the Advent in glory, to the appearance of Christ as judge and king on the last day. We must prepare both our souls and our surroundings so as to hold ourselves in holy readiness even for the "abomination of desolation" which must be endured before we can "look up and lift up our heads, because our redemption is at hand."

At home in the living room we hang the evergreen wreath, symbol of eternity, to which we attach four candles, symbols of the time that, week by week, is taking us nearer to the fulfilment of our salvation—in the anniversary of His incarnation two thousand years ago, and in the actuality of His future appearance "on the clouds of heaven with power and majesty." As we sing the wonderful songs of Advent, above all the deep-moving *Rorate coeli*, we become filled with the under-

standing and the spirit of this important liturgical season.

*Christmas.* On this blessed day Jesus Christ, Son of God, came into our earthly life, came down from heaven in obedience and charity. In spite of a horrible, secularized, commercialized Santa Claus, more and more shameful each year, an unworthy parody of one of the great saints of the early Church, in spite of belittling sentimentality in songs, poems and pictures, in spite of business and advertising, we must direct our family's attention to the most holy mystery of the Incarnation, to the appearance of God Himself, and to His last coming at the end of the world. We shall never be tempted to overlook the heroic and redemptive character of this time if we celebrate feast after feast with the Church, beginning with that of St. Stephen, the first martyr, and continuing with those of the Holy Innocents, the Holy Name, and the Holy Family, on to the culmination in Epiphany when Christ's divinity is manifested in the three mysteries: the adoration of the Wise Men, or the calling of the gentiles; the first miracle in Cana; and the baptism in the Jordan by St. John.

This does not mean that we should not have a crib in the home. On the contrary, we should help the children relive this holy history, from the vain search for an inn to the flight into Egypt, by representing all phases of the Christmas story with the statues of the crib.

As far as Christmas gifts are concerned, let us emphasize their true meaning, now so generally forgotten: overpowered by God's generosity in giving His only-begotten Son as the Redeemer of mankind, Christians feel urged to imitate in a limited manner God's great

love and liberality by spreading happiness among relatives and friends through gifts. Only if our gifts—small though they be—are borne along on a wave of true charity will they be worthy to lie beside the crib, which represents the real Gift, the Gift of all gifts, without which we should still be sitting in darkness and in the slavery of sin.<sup>4</sup>

*Epiphany.* Liturgically, this feast has always ranked higher than Christmas. Beautiful and ancient customs are related to this day, as the blessing of homes and of food. In certain parts of Europe, the children still bring food (bread and eggs), salt, incense and chalk to church to be blessed. The bread and eggs are then eaten at home, and all rooms are incensed. With the blessed chalk the father writes the initials of the three Magi (19 C + M + B + 42) on each door to remind us that we too are called to adore Christ the King, and that all our comings and goings be but an unswerving answer to that call.

*Candlemas.* Carrying a candle for each member of the family, we accompany our Blessed Mother on her way to the temple. This candle is blessed so that the blessing may be with us on all feast days of the coming year, on all days of sorrow, in storms and sickness too.

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<sup>4</sup>Thus we can easily get rid of the "white lies" about "Santa" or the Angels entering the home at night with the presents. *It is the Christchild who presents our family with the abundance of grace and happiness and peace; it is His love which urges us to find means to represent in visible and tangible form His great gift of Himself to us, so that we may to some extent understand the great mystery of the Incarnation. Certainly, let us do all in our power to surround this entire season with the mystery proper to Christmastide, but let us abstain from telling our children so-called pious lies. Too often they undermine the children's confidence in the words of their parents and they can never do justice to the great mystery to which we are trying to introduce them.*

And if we expect a new member in the family or intend to become a godparent, we will have blessed a large and, if possible, a genuine beeswax candle to be the baptismal, communion, bridal and death candle of the expected child. Two other candles are also provided in case one of the family should fall sick and have to receive Holy Viaticum at home.

If there should be no candle procession in church or if we are unable to attend, we may have one at home, going through the house with our blessed candles, singing the praises of God and His Blessed Mother and repeating the prayers of the candle-blessing. This way of celebrating religious feasts never bores the children; in fact, they can never get enough of it.

*Lent.* Every season of the natural year has its particular tasks, especially for the husbandman; the same holds true of the Christian life with regard to the different seasons of the liturgical year. Spring occupies a very important place in the life of the tiller of the soil; as far as man is concerned, spring decides what the crop will be. Similarly in the life of grace, Lent holds an almost decisive position (Lent is but another word for spring). The more carefully we put away the deeds of winter, the "dead" deeds, the deeper we plow in order that the new seed may find a well-prepared soil enriched with the good deeds of fasting and prayer, the more shall we enjoy the vigorous plants that will spring up and the abundance of the harvest. The picture of the farmer and the gardener is very useful and impressive for the children; it becomes the source of numerous explanations and examples, and besides is a perfect parable for the mystery of the cooperation of God and man toward one and the same end.

Just as Nature renews herself every spring, so during the Church's spring we are encouraged to begin anew with the catechumens. We prepare for the renewal of our baptism, we suffer with Christ for our sins, we are buried with Him so that we may also arise with Him to a new life of grace and glory.

It is as human as it is Catholic to celebrate the three days before Ash Wednesday as gaily as possible, to fill them with good cheer and childlike fun; this pre-lenten celebration helps so much toward a serious lenten observance. The Sundays of Lent, too, are intended by Mother Church as a kind of pause in order to relax on the way, in order to gather new strength for the following week. Laetare Sunday is distinguished by its entire liturgy: as the rose-colored dawn announces the coming day, so the joy of this Sunday—with its gay vestments, its music, its flowers—foretells the tenfold joy of Easter. For the sake of a really holy Lent let us follow the wise psychology of the Church!

On Ash Wednesday or on the preceding Sunday let us study the liturgy of the lenten season and try to make the children understand the symbolism of the blessed ashes. Let us decide together how we shall celebrate Lent in our family, how each one may do his share according to his capacity.

Ash Wednesday should be a quiet and earnest day in our home. In a silent procession we may gather up the palms of the preceding year and carefully burn them. This burning of the old palm we may interpret as the "burning" of one of our faults which we will try to overcome as a special personal lenten sacrifice. The little ceremony will impress the children very deeply and help them to keep their resolutions.

As we enter Lent and prepare for the renewal of our souls and of our religious life under the guidance of the Church, our daily prayer should broaden and deepen through contact with the day's liturgy. We must try hard to keep the fast and to practice self-denial and mortification. Our example will foster in the children the right or wrong idea of this lenten practice.

Step by step we progress to Passiontide, which urges us to follow Christ on the way of His cross, and to Palm Sunday, the high point before Holy Week—that period of deepest mourning. We devoutly take home the blessed palm and again have a “procession” through the house while we decorate every room with this sign of Christ's victory, the while singing His praises with psalms and hymns. But, then, confessing that we too were among those who shouted *Crucifige!* after the triumphant *Hosanna*, we break some of the palms, bind the pieces into little crosses and wear them through Holy Week as daily reminders that we must patiently bear the cross with Christ if we wish to share in His glorious resurrection.

Holy Week holds a very important place in the liturgy. The more we prepare for it by thinking it over at home—and this is true of all feasts and sacraments—the more intelligently and fruitfully shall we participate in it. It is regrettable that we no longer take home the Easter fire. As for the Easter water, whose consecration we witness, the family should take it home and regard it as a precious symbol of their renewal in Christ. There should be another family “procession” on the evening of Holy Saturday, when the rooms and the members of the household are blessed with the new water which may then be placed on the home altar. In

memory of our submersion in sin and emergence from it through the grace of Christ's death, we then renew our baptismal vows.

*Easter.* The joy of resurrection, the exultation of the Alleluia must fill our home, now decorated with the first green growths of renewed nature. It should be a solemn religious act of the father to bless with Easter water the various foods of which we have denied ourselves during Lent, reminding his family of the goodness and providence of God. This blessing used to be given in church after Easter service; but as long as pastors do not renew the usage, the father as the "priest" of the family is surely entitled to perform it. The Roman Ritual has a special blessing for the Easter lamb, Easter eggs,<sup>5</sup> bread and new fruits. In some rural districts this blessing is still given by the pastor.

*Pentecost.* In contrast to medieval times, the Holy Ghost has today become an "unknown God." Even many Catholics regard Pentecost as they do any other Sunday and do not know what it means. From the liturgical viewpoint Pentecost is the second culmination of Eastertide. It is the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit, "without whom nothing good can be done on earth" and whose coming was promised by Christ, filled the whole world and all living beings with His grace and activity. Reason enough to praise God in His Trinity, to invite the Holy Spirit to abide with our family, and to go out into the reborn fields to find

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<sup>5</sup>We must again consider the Easter egg in its true light—as the symbol of life, the symbol of the resurrected Christ victoriously breaking the shell of death. And for that reason let us return to the venerable custom of decorating the Easter eggs with Christian and Easter symbols instead of with the childish and nonsensical pictures now so commonly found.



His footprints! This means that our outing on Pentecost should be different from our ordinary family outings. Pentecost is also the proper day for the renewal of our confirmation, by which we were anointed for the universal priesthood and filled with the Holy Ghost. And it is the proper day to celebrate the birth of the Church of Christ, founded on the rock of Peter, to give thanks for being called unto her, to pray for her, and to renew our promise of fidelity and obedience to her.

Here rightly should follow a consideration of the bright and colorful wreath of the other liturgical feasts: of the Blessed Trinity and Christ the King, of our Blessed Mother and of all the saints. But it would take too long. Since the Church counts her days according to her feasts, we too should learn to do so again. Our great-grandparents did not know a better calendar, even for sowing and harvesting! Let us therefore join liturgically in her motherly remembrance of all her children who "fought the good fight," who "finished the course," who "kept the faith," in a life which essentially was not at all different from ours. Let us take on the calm, the love and the joy with which she venerates the memory of her saints. Ernest Hello says: "The mountains may fall to pieces one day; but if on this day there should occur the feast of a little shepherdess, for instance, of St. Germana, the Church will celebrate the feast of the little shepherdess with the unbroken calm that is her gift from eternity. Let the noise of peoples and kings around her grow as wild as it may: she never forgets one of her poor, one of her beggars, one of her martyrs. Storms or centuries do not change her course. Despite the storms she retraces with calm steps the course of centuries to celebrate the glory of a girl,

unknown in her own life and now dead for a thousand years."

We should know and study the lives and virtues of at least our family patron saints, of those whose names we bear and who were called to lead us throughout life to salvation. At least their feasts ought to become family feasts. We should know their biographies, their books, letters, and the documents of their canonization. We should find out why our parents chose these names and these saints, because we do not get them by accident but through divine Providence.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this name of ours corresponds closely to that name wherewith God called us unto life and wherewith He will call us to judgment, the "name which no one knows."

Once in a while on days of importance to the family we may say a family litany, calling on all the family's patron saints whose names we have received in baptism and confirmation, to make us conscious that they are ready, and ever will be, to guide us and help us in all the difficulties of our life.

#### DAILY GROWTH

There still remains the smallest liturgical cycle, the day and its worship. It should be the fruit and result of liturgical family life that we pray even the daily prayers with the Church, Lauds and Prime in the

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<sup>6</sup>How unbecoming, and yet, alas! how common (with shame we must confess it) for Catholics to follow the custom of their pagan neighbors in choosing names for their children. Those regenerated in baptism as sons of God in Christ and called to His service ought proudly to bear the names of those elect members of the mystical body, the Saints in heaven; their example will incite to a holier life, their intercession will afford protection. Hence very fittingly the Roman Ritual forbids the imposition in baptism of lewd, mythical and foolish names, or those of impious and godless men.

morning, Vespers and Compline in the evening, as well as the meal-prayers of the Church. Of course we shall rarely do so well as that. There are too many obstacles, external ones at least. But by ever keeping this ideal in mind as the ultimate goal, we can prepare for it. A psalm or a hymn added to the children's prayers, varying with the liturgical seasons, makes the family prayer more interesting and beloved. Once in a while on family feasts or holydays, whenever we have more solemn prayer, we may say Vespers or Compline. Unfamiliar words and phrases may be explained to the children so that they can readily follow and understand. Thus they gradually grow into the daily rhythm of the liturgy till they are ready to pray and even sing parts of the Office with father and mother, at least on Sundays.

Even if we never should succeed in having a family practice such as this, how beautiful, how consoling it is to know that the Church, in her servants, is praying all day long for us and in our stead, while we do the earthly things which duty demands for the praise and honor of God.

*Home Altar.* Very important for the "home church" is the home altar. Every family should have a place to kneel and pray. A picture on the wall or a statue, two candles—what is Sunday night prayer without candles!—a small cross on a chest, and a cloth which may be made or stitched by our children—these can make up the family altar. We reflect the life of the Church by changing pictures, texts and prayers according to the liturgical time, the feasts and the saints of the day. In magazines and calendars we find good religious pictures which may be put in simple frames or pasted on cardboard. Or we may cut out in different liturgical

colors the symbols of the festal season; or better still, we may help the children to do so. We should realize that the simplest things carefully made by ourselves, with love and understanding, are far more worth-while than all the trinkets out of a dime store or even more expensive articles which can never, in all their sweetness and unreality, reflect the true liturgical spirit.

*Daily Prayer Life.* Let us not neglect to instruct our children, and ourselves too, about the meaning of the signs we use in our prayers. Since we are composed of soul and body, both must join in the worship we give to God, one helping the other to bring about the right spirit and attitude for prayer.

The sign of the cross should be the thoughtful and respectful remembrance of that indelible seal which was impressed on our souls in the solemn rite of baptism: "*Accipe signum crucis tam in fronte quam in corde*—Receive the sign of the cross upon the forehead and upon the heart. . . ." It is the sign of Christ's bitter death that redeemed us from being eternally lost, the sign given us as a weapon and never-failing protection against the temptations and onslaughts of Satan, a sacred sign that dedicates our head, mouth, heart, right and left arms with all their potentialities and powers to the service of Christ.

The folding of the hands should be the expression of the undivided concentration and contemplation we give to the words we speak to God, an expression of the cessation of all distracting activity, of our being voluntarily bound for Christ—Christ's prisoners. We may explain this better by recalling the impressive ceremony in the ordination of a priest. After the anointing of his hands, the bishop binds the folded hands together,

making him Christ's prisoner now and forever. Again, in folding our hands we may recall that the right and left are woven together forming a unity; and ceasing from all labor and every diversion they express our union with Christ. Turning from all earthly things, we look now to spiritual things with all the strength of our mind and will. How eloquent the prayers of our hands can be even though voice and lips be silent!

The kneeling posture should be the outward sign of the need we have to profess our human smallness before the majesty of God. Thus we men, being made out of dust, bow down to the dust in humility, calling out of the depths unto God in the highest. It is the position of the servant, the sinner, the beggar, and the needy.

By standing we express our readiness to listen to God's word, and our willingness to labor wherever and whenever God wishes. We stand to receive His final directions and His last blessing before leaving for work or for the fight in His cause. "Here I am," we say, "ready to hear and ready to obey." It is the position of the knight and soldier of Christ.

*Family Sacramentals.* In speaking of the liturgy and the family we must not omit the rather unknown and neglected subject of the sacramentals intended for the family. It would be real Catholic Action to make known again to everyone the blessing of the house and the home, the blessing of an expectant mother and of the mother after childbirth, the blessings of the children in the home, in church, and especially in times of sickness. We find it hard now to understand that once the liturgy was so close and so near to the natural events in family life that, for instance, it accompanied

the newly-married couple to their home, prayed over their house and blessed their chamber:

Bless, O Lord, God almighty, this place, that they may abide here in health, purity, victory, strength, humility, goodness and meekness, the fulfilment of the law, and thanksgiving to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and may this blessing remain over this place and on all those who dwell here now and forever. Amen.

In blessing the bed chamber, the priest says:

Bless, O Lord, this bed chamber. Let all who dwell in it stand firm in Thy peace and may they persevere in obedience to Thy will; may they see many years and a numerous posterity and finally attain to the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

And when faith and love have borne their fruit, Mother Church comes again to visit the home and prays with the young mother "that by the firmness of her faith she may be protected from every evil."

The liturgy blesses the mother and the growing life within her. It also blesses the home, praying that the angels may dwell therein and watch over mother and child. There is hardly another time in a mother's life when she will appreciate such a blessing more than during the period of pregnancy, when she is filled with hope and also with fear, with joy as well as sorrow, deprived as she often is during these days of the consolation that comes from frequent participation in the holy Sacrifice. It would indeed be difficult to forsake a Church that follows her children and stays with them in their

most difficult hours and watches over them with such maternal care.

And as soon as the newborn child has been reborn by water and the Holy Ghost, as soon as the mother is able to give thanks personally for the gift of life, both natural and supernatural, by means of a solemn visit to the church, Mother Church joins her in joy and thanksgiving. She sends her priest, vested in surplice and stole, to greet the mother with psalms at the church door, to bless her with holy water and to lead her reverently with the stole to the altar where together they praise the goodness of God and offer prayers for the mother and the child.

Let us pray. Almighty everlasting God, who, through the delivery of the blessed Virgin Mary, hast turned the pains of the faithful at childbirth into joy, look mercifully upon this Thine handmaid, coming in gladness to Thy temple to offer up her thanks: and grant that, after this life, by the merits and intercession of the same blessed Mary, she may merit to attain, together with her offspring, to the joys of everlasting happiness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

What has become of this wonderful rite? What remains of this feast day not only of the family but of the whole community as it was observed centuries ago, and as it is still observed in a few rural communities? Accompanied in a joyful procession by her neighbors and friends, attired in holiday clothes, the young mother brought her child to church to give thanks to God. Little remains, unfortunately, of this observance of the mother's first visit to the church after childbirth. The respectful reception by the priest at the entrance of the

church, an honor which is shown only to the bishop visiting the church officially, is now confused with the rites before baptism, when the unbaptized person is not allowed to enter the church before answering the questions and receiving the exorcisms. The lighted candle in the mother's hands symbolizes the new life that was enkindled in baptism from Christ's divine life, and thus the candle represents the child itself (nowadays, unfortunately, the child, because of its weakness or because of danger of exposure, is not brought along to church). The blessing with holy water, too, what else is it but another mark of respect for the mother? But all this has been misinterpreted, and the rite has come to be considered a ceremony of purification which, needless to say, is entirely at variance with the Christian concept of matrimony. If we read and study this rite we will quickly be convinced that the Church never intended it to be the painfully embarrassing act that is so distasteful to most mothers. Let us in kindness to our friends tell them about this rite and its significance; we might also accompany them to their "churching," thus helping to dispel any thought of its being some sort of public penance. Of course, it is not *necessary* to receive this blessing, but if it is received in the right spirit and with understanding it becomes another source of joy and grace extended to us by Mother Church, after many weeks of sorrow and suffering.

Time goes on. The child grows. Should it have no further contact with the liturgy for the next seven or more years? That would indeed seem to involve a curious reflection on "Mother" Church. Actually, during this time we have the blessing for children who are brought to church, often administered on Christmas, or



on the feast of the Holy Innocents, in a special service for children. There is also a blessing for children given when the priest visits the home. Could there be parents who would not be grateful to the priest for praying over their children? A third blessing is provided for the sick child. "Is someone sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church." But does this not include the infant and the child? The liturgy answers the question by giving us the blessing for the sick child. It would be a work of real charity and pastoral care for souls if the priest were to make a habit of visiting not only the sick adults of his flock but the sick children as well, and of praying over them. For the visitation of sick children the ritual gives three beautiful prayers:

O God, to whom all things grow, and by whom they are strengthened when grown, stretch forth Thy hand upon Thy servant who is sick at a tender age: that recovering the vigor of health, he may arrive at the fulness of years, and always give unto Thee a faithful and grateful service all the days of his life. Through our Lord. . . .

O Father of mercies and God of all consolation, who providing in manifold tenderness for the good of Thy creatures grantest the grace of healing not only to the soul but also to the body, deign to raise this sick child from his bed of suffering, and to restore him safe and sound to Thy holy Church and to his parents; so that all the days of his prolonged life he may increase in grace and wisdom before Thee and men, serve Thee in justice and holiness, and give due thanks to Thy mercy. Through Christ . . . .

O God, who in a wonderful order appointest the ministries of angels and of men, grant in Thy mercy that they who ever stand ministering to Thee in heaven may also guard the life of this child upon earth. Through Christ . . . .

*Placing his right hand on the forehead of the child:* May Jesus, the Son of Mary, the salvation and Lord of the world, through the merits and intercession of His apostles Peter and Paul and of all His saints be merciful to you and full of tenderness. Amen.

Although the child may not be able to appreciate this touching rite, the sorrowing parents assuredly will. And if God should nevertheless ask of them the life of their child, this blessing and prayer may obtain for them the strength to make the sacrifice in full conformity to the divine will.

As can be seen from the wording of the prayers, they may also be recited by the father and mother when the visit of the priest cannot be arranged, or in fact whenever circumstances suggest the use of these beautiful prayers of the Church's liturgy.

Though we close here, we are quite aware that much more can be said on the subject—and done. We pray that the Holy Ghost will complete the incomplete, He “without whom nothing good can be done on earth.”



