

## **THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN A NEW GENERATION: A FAMILIAL VOCATION BEYOND THE HOME**

### A NEW GENERATION OF CATHOLICS

In the Catholic home in which I grew up, I was taught to love God, but be skeptical of church and tradition. As a child, I do not remember questioning the existence of God, my family's spontaneous prayer before dinner, or Sunday Mass with *Spes Nova*, a community of families who left the local parish in order to meet together in our homes. I prayed on my own, talked about religion with my friends in CLC, and listened to *Godspell* on the stereo.

I was gifted with two strongly believing parents who spared me the traditional practices that they thought would be alienating. Evidence of Catholicism in our home included books by Hans Küng, a painting of John F. Kennedy, and a dog named Berrigan, and, but no pictures of popes, no rosaries, and no icons of Mary. No one spoke to me of hell or sin, and Confession was not encouraged. I learned of traditional Catholicism not through the Catechism, but through the books and plays of ex-Catholics who told of empty traditions, an obsession with sex, and an excess of judgment over mercy.

My older Catholic friends laugh when I tell them that on my very first Sunday at college, instead of claiming freedom from this tradition, I went straight to the Catholic student center and joined the folk group. In my four years at college, I rarely missed the 5:00 p.m. Mass. Slowly, I came to feel a part of the Church that I did not intend to leave.

Not everything took. I still feel unease in the Holy Thursday service at my home parish, which involves a lot of incense, Latin songs I do not know, and a long procession of some forty vested priests. I remember with fondness Holy Thursday as we celebrated it in *Spes Nova*: a simple seder around my best friend Becky's ping pong table. I am not young enough to be a John Paul II Catholic and would not count myself among the "new orthodox" believers. However, I am more inclined to question our troubled culture than our imperfect church. I teach both social ethics and sexual ethics (referred to by some of my elders as "pelvic theology"). I am deeply concerned with constructing practices that connect families to the world. This marks me as part of a new generation of theologians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Like most of my colleagues, I am somewhat reluctant to speak on behalf of a whole generation. I do not pretend that my experience is typical of Generation X theologians. Rather, I offer my own experience in order to highlight some commonalities that seem to be shared by many in this new generation.

The post-Vatican II generation of Catholics grew up outside of Catholic subcultures and Catholic certainties.<sup>2</sup> We were less constricted, so less concerned with claiming freedom. We were less sheltered, so more able to hear warnings about the lack of respect for human dignity in both the sexual and the social realm. Surrounded with pluralism and skepticism, we had to construct our Catholic identity from the ground up.

Faced with a culture that seems fundamentally misguided, many of us find it necessary to begin with the personal, not to dismiss the political, but in order to gain a foothold from which to address larger problems. We are inclined to go inward and wrestle with questions of how we ought to live before turning to structural solutions that may or may not materialize. Our work is a search for alternative way of life that assumes pluralism rather than seeking to fight against it. We seek an authentic way to be Christian, and it seems to us that that way must begin in the home and point beyond it. In my remarks this morning, I would like to provide an illustration of this new work by arguing that contemporary parish life fails to sufficiently challenge our troubled culture, and suggesting that a family ethic centered on alternative practices has the potential to transform family and the social order in promising ways.

#### MARRIAGE AND PARISH LIFE AS WE KNOW THEM

In American cities and suburbs, a new generation of married Catholic theologians experiences the virtues and excesses of American culture, and does theology out of reflection on this experience. Amid economic plentitude and a myriad of opportunities, there is, many have noted, a certain emptiness. It is not that the lives of most American families really center on commodities rather than persons.<sup>3</sup> Even though they live in a consumer society, surely most do not see persons “as replaceable objects whose goal and value are dependent upon how much we market, produce, and consume.”<sup>4</sup> Their love of friends and family is made concrete in hours spent at work to support their households and in the hundreds of small tasks (from doing laundry to coaching baseball teams to supporting friends through times of illness) that fill their days. Though they have a great many more things than most people in the world, their lives are not obviously consumed with “having” rather than “being.”<sup>5</sup> The strongly negative characterizations of the literature on consumerism are overdone.

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<sup>2</sup>See William L. Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004): 35-66.

<sup>3</sup>John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 126.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>5</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1987), no. 28.

And yet one can hear in the conversations of middle class adults a certain dissatisfaction, a yearning for a slower pace, deeper friendships, and more time to be with their spouses, children, and friends. They are conscious of their relative privilege and of the waste of resources that middle class life entails. They know their children do not really need more things.<sup>6</sup> They wish they had more time to serve the poor, work for peace, or help the environment. They know they ought to spend more time in quiet. There is an emptiness amid the fullness of middle class American family life, a suspicion that busyness does not allow us to live below the surface, either personally or politically.<sup>7</sup>

The modern Catholic vision for marriage and family developed by John Paul II calls for something else entirely. In *Familiaris consortio*, the late pope gives families a mission to be a communion of love, give and value life, be church together, and, perhaps most notably, serve society—working to transform its unjust structures and soften its hard edges with works of charity, mercy, and hospitality.<sup>8</sup> It is the most integrated, challenging, and inspiring vision for marriage that I have found. Yet given the heavy load most married people are carrying just trying to support their own children and communities, it seems all but impossible. However, the practices to which the pope calls families, though they seem burdensome, actually provide a structure for a way of life that is potentially more personally fulfilling and socially responsible. When people open themselves to deeper relationships with others, they build communion (deep relationship with other human beings) and solidarity (a commitment to live as if all really are responsible for all).<sup>9</sup> This is not a way to emptiness but to fullness.

If American culture makes living this integrated Catholic vision for families difficult, parishes ought to be nurturing an alternative way of life. Two-thirds of all Catholics are registered parishioners and most attend their local parish.<sup>10</sup> Parishes are the communities that most Catholics call home. They are ideally placed to form families. However, research on Catholic parishes suggests that most are not supportive of an integrated Catholic vision of families and the social

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<sup>6</sup>Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 15-17.

<sup>7</sup>Anecdotedly, I hear many comment on how friendships are harder to sustain, frustration with available avenues to work for political or social change, and constant references to busyness.

<sup>8</sup>John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), no. 17.

<sup>9</sup>John Paul II describes communion as an ever-deepening love which is the “the foundation and soul of the community of marriage,” (*Familiaris consortio*, no. 18) and solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we really are responsible for all,” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38).

<sup>10</sup>Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to the Best Places and Practices* (New York: Paulist, 2001), xii.

order. Formation in a distinctive way of life is, for the most part, absent. Parishes do not bind families together in community, and thus they do not form them in alternative values, or promote commitment to justice.

In contrast, in the first half of the twentieth century, urban ethnic parish neighborhoods were central formative agents in the lives of American Catholics.<sup>11</sup> Marginalized by ethnicity, class, and religion, Catholics moved outside the mainstream of American society. Parishes functioned as indispensable subcultures for immigrant Catholics, providing social services, education, and community. Historians of this period speak of the “unified family-based parish as the source of internalized Catholic identity.”<sup>12</sup> Pre-Vatican II Catholics were acculturated into their faith through the whole of parish life.<sup>13</sup> Parish social life in the early 20th century included sports clubs, social clubs, dances, picnics, and variety shows.<sup>14</sup> Small parishes could support a wide range of activities because they served as a central gathering place for parishioners who were united not only by faith, but also by ethnicity, class, proximity, and family ties. In addition, Catholic action groups offered parishioners opportunities to deepen their spiritual life in the company of friends and neighbors.<sup>15</sup> Ethnic urban parishes drew people to the tradition by gathering as community not only for Sunday Mass, but for spiritual associations, novenas, Saturday confession, parish missions, festivals honoring saints, and Lenten suppers. These activities helped to form distinctive Catholic communities.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, in ethnic urban parishes with working class congregations, pro-

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<sup>11</sup>James T. Fisher, *Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 121. Not all parishes were dominated by one ethnic group. When parishes first developed in the late 1800s, some were territorial and others were national or ethnic. Still, ethnic and religious cultures were often intertwined and mutually supporting. See Gerald P. Fogarty, “The Parish and Community in American Catholic History,” reprinted in *Building the American Catholic City*, ed. Brian C. Mitchell (New York: Garland, 1988), 1-25.

<sup>12</sup>George A. Kelly, *The Second Spring of the Church in America* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Warren, *Faith, Culture, and the Worshipping Community: Shaping the Practice of the Local Church*, Rev. Ed. (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>14</sup>Andrew M. Greeley and Mary Greeley Durkin, “The Parish as Organic Community,” in *Ibid.*, *How to Save the Catholic Church* (New York: Viking, 1984), 173.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 169. See also, Philip Murnion, “The Catholic Parish in the Public Square,” in *American Catholics and Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice*, ed. Margaret O’Brien Steinfels (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 76.

<sup>16</sup>Even after World War II, social life in urban and ethnic parishes remained vibrant, regular Mass attendance rose to 75%, and a majority of Catholics strongly identified with the church. The mid-sixties were the peak time for Catholics in America, when schools, parishes, and the structures of the Catholic subculture were thriving. See William V. D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007), 55, 41.

viding for the needy was a central parish endeavor. In the early twentieth century, Catholic parishes brought together a network of families to share resources and responsibilities. Parishioners needed each other for social and spiritual support. Social services such as food pantries, soup kitchens, building and loan associations, and dues-paying societies that provided benefits when family members became sick or died were necessary to meet the needs of those struggling to make a living.<sup>17</sup> Many of these Catholics could have identified with the struggles of masses spoken of in Catholic social documents as they worked in the labor movement, Catholic action groups, and their own neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup>

It is important not to be overly idealistic about the past, especially if you have never been there. If many pre-Vatican II parishes formed Catholics into strong communities and provided for the neediest among them, they did not necessarily prepare families to embrace the mission that would later be articulated by John Paul II. Traditional practices do not assure communion or solidarity. Catholic identity can be more cultural than religious. Nonetheless, most pre-Vatican II parishes could count on things that few contemporary parishes can because they were at the center of families' lives. The integration of family, neighborhood, parish, school, and social network produced levels of community and commitment that are uncommon today.

American Catholics cannot go back in time, and should not discount the good things about contemporary Catholic life, including economic stability of most families, their multi-layered identities, and overlapping commitments. In fact, because we now have to ask what it means to be Catholic, we may have a new "opportunity for building a Catholic community based not on ethnicity or on defense, but on religion."<sup>19</sup> Still, we ought to consider how parishes have changed in order to understand better what might be necessary to strengthen Catholic commitment today.

#### PARISH LIFE FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

In the last 50 years, parishes have become less central in the lives of American Catholics and less distinct from the rest of American society. Since, "Catholics are now firmly planted in the nation's upper middle class,"<sup>20</sup> they no longer need their parishes to sustain them.<sup>21</sup> Ethnic conclaves are less necessary as

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<sup>17</sup>Fogarty, "Parish and Community," 9.

<sup>18</sup>See Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998)*, 30-75, who describes American Catholic social movements in early twentieth century.

<sup>19</sup>Fogarty, "Parish and Community," 25.

<sup>20</sup>James D. Davidson, *Catholicism in Motion: The Church in American Society* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2005), 12. Although not all Catholics are middle class, the change in economic status of most Catholics is widely documented.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

Catholics feel more at home in the multi-ethnic mix of American society.<sup>22</sup> With upward mobility and integration into American middle class society came a loss of distinctive Catholic community. According to historian James Fisher, "By the 1990s it appeared that Catholics truly were 'like everyone else' in the U.S., but it was not entirely clear just what made them Catholic."<sup>23</sup>

The structure of contemporary middle class American life does not allow for the kind of direct involvement in parish life that was common in the pre-Vatican II era. More families are balancing two careers (or one job and one parent) and multiple schools more likely to be farther from home than the neighborhood parish, where only a small minority attends school anymore.<sup>24</sup> There are more children's activities that require more volunteer time and more driving, and hours at home are more hectic because chores, homework, family time, and extra work from professional jobs have to be squeezed into a very small time frame each day.

To serve these newly middle class Catholics, parishes have become upwardly mobile, larger, and less intimate. Despite relatively low levels of donations by parishioners, only a minority of parishes have financial problems.<sup>25</sup> Many parishes are adding new buildings to accommodate a growing range of activities, gyms for extensive sports programs, and staff to do what used to be done by priests, nuns, or volunteers.<sup>26</sup> Suburban parishes, which are growing, tend to be bigger than urban parishes that are closing in large numbers. Though about one quarter of parishes are still small, the average parish today has over 3000 members, and cannot possibly serve the same function as the ethnic parishes of the early 20th century.<sup>27</sup>

Today's parishes serve middle class suburbanites for whom the parish is one of many loyalties and often are not communities in any meaningful sense of the

<sup>22</sup>Integration is incomplete. Even in 1994, Catholics were still highly concentrated in the urban northeast and upper Midwest, Fisher, *Catholics in America*, 163. In addition, new immigrants (Mexican, Philipino, Polish, Dominican Republican, and Vietnamese) continue to provide a fresh influx of Catholics who are more closely tied to ethnic parishes and less assimilated (Davidson, *Catholics in Motion*, 19). Still, the overall upward trend is clear.

<sup>23</sup>Fisher, *Catholics in America*, 162.

<sup>24</sup>In 1950s, more than half of Catholic children attended parish schools. Today, the figure is closer to 15%. See National Catholic Educational Association, *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2006-2007: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing*. Available at <http://www.ncea.org>.

<sup>25</sup>James D. Davidson and Suzanne C. Fournier, "Recent Research on Catholic Parishes: A Research Note," *Review of Religious Research* 48 no. 1 (2006): 74.

<sup>26</sup>William D'Antonio, et al., *Laity: American and Catholic: Transforming the Church* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 127. See also, Mary Beth Celio, "Celebrating Catholic Parishes" (March 7, 2001), who reports that the size of the average parish staff is now 5.4, and that most parishes have difficulty recruiting volunteers (15).

<sup>27</sup>Davidson and Fournier, "Recent Research on Catholic Parishes," 72. The average parish size increased from 1,881 in 1959 to 3097 in 2000.

term. Thirty percent of registered parishioners say that none of their five best friends is in their parish; twenty-five percent say only one or two are, and fifty-one percent say none or not much of their social life involves people in the parish.<sup>28</sup> Most families do not see their parish as their primary source of community, but they are not disturbed by this.<sup>29</sup> They are largely satisfied with their parishes, and rate them high on friendliness, average on meeting their spiritual needs, and lowest on helping them with ethical questions related to their daily lives at home and work.<sup>30</sup> Incredibly, “though parishes are becoming increasingly large and complex, most Catholics do not worry that they are too big or impersonal.”<sup>31</sup> Most are comfortable with the minor role parishes play in their lives because they are more invested elsewhere. As a result, the strong community bonds that are the necessary foundation of alternative ways of life are not being nurtured.

The change in community also affects the way social justice issues are addressed. When Catholics moved into the middle class, social justice became something removed from every day life. Although the majority of Catholics still stay in their neighborhood parishes, they do not feel compelled to either by ethnicity, class, or need. Financially comfortable younger Catholics may shop around and choose the parish they like, one that will help in their quest for greater spiritual growth and their desire to do something for others.<sup>32</sup> Half of all parishes today engage in at least some direct social ministry and one third engage in some advocacy,<sup>33</sup> and Catholics generally support this. In fact, younger Catholics are even more likely than older Catholics to say that the church’s teaching on helping the poor is very important to them.<sup>34</sup>

However, middle class parishes tend to focus their energy on activities such as delivering food baskets at holidays or providing casseroles for a soup kitchen rather than encouraging the ongoing work of mentoring, tutoring, or advocacy.<sup>35</sup> Though parishes may offer some direct service opportunities, few parishioners

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<sup>28</sup>See William V. D’Antonio et al, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

<sup>29</sup>David C. Leege, “The American Catholic Parish,” in *American Catholic Identity: Essays in an Age of Change*, ed. Francis J. Butler (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 78.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>31</sup>D’Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 121.

<sup>32</sup>Kelly, *Second Spring*, 7.

<sup>33</sup>Murnion, “Catholic Parish in the Public Square,” 84. Poor parishes have much more to offer in this area (85).

<sup>34</sup>D’Antonio, et al., “American Catholics Today,” 93. This was the only teaching that was found to be more important to Millennials than to other generations of Catholics, though the percentage gap (91%-84%) is not wide.

<sup>35</sup>Celio, “Celebrating Catholic Parishes,” 10. Celio notes that the average parish supports 6.1 ongoing programs, but this figure includes teen activities, altar guild, prayer groups, etc. (11).

are involved in these efforts in a significant way. Moreover, nearly half believe one can be a good Catholic without doing anything for the poor.<sup>36</sup> More people are sympathetic to the social teachings of the Church: eighty-two percent say charity is important and seventy-one percent agree that God is present in the poor in a special way.<sup>37</sup> They are proud that their church takes prophetic stands on social issues. Yet, working for social justice is seen one possible way to live out one's faith rather than an essential part of Christian community. The work of charity and advocacy remains distant from the lives of most. Parishes are but one of many loyalties of Catholic adults and their ethical choices about where to spend their time and money are not greatly influenced either by their parishes or by the social teachings to which they adhere in theory.

Moreover, parishes themselves often make it more difficult for families to choose an alternative practice by offering plentiful activities that are of little help to those trying to realize a distinctive Christian vision of marriage.<sup>38</sup> Catholic Youth Organization sports programs consume too large a portion of families' free time in some parts of the country.<sup>39</sup> Teen activities can isolate teens from the needs of their communities.<sup>40</sup> Men's and women's groups rarely engage parishioners in challenging conversations about their faith.<sup>41</sup> Social events like auctions, carnivals, trivia nights, and golf tournaments require large investments of parishioners' time and money and seem to mimic the culture rather than helping to construct an alternative to it.<sup>42</sup> Opportunities to collect food, clothes, or money for the needy are marginal to the life of most parishes and substitute for ongoing

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<sup>36</sup>D'Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 27.

<sup>37</sup>Davidson, *American Catholics in Motion*, 135.

<sup>38</sup>A recent survey found that parishes offered an average of four organized ministries, though many offer more. See Murnion, "Catholic Church in the Public Square," 73.

<sup>39</sup>CYO sports programs are offered by 50% of parishes (Celio, "Celebrating Catholic Parishes," 11). In my neighborhood parish, games are scheduled from Friday night until Sunday night, and children commonly play one or two sports each season. For families with multiple children, weekends are dominated by games most of the year.

<sup>40</sup>Teen activities are the most common program offered in Catholic parishes, followed by Altar Guild and Knight of Columbus (*Ibid.*, 10). Most of these groups do not have extensive service components.

<sup>41</sup>A recent men's club even advertised at a local parish exemplifies this problem and points to the related issue of social mobility. The parish men invite people to an annual sports trivia night with no observable connection to Christian faith. Tickets divide parishioners into four groups according to how much money they spend. Twenty dollars buys dinner and an open wine and beer bar, along with unlimited peanuts and popcorn. However, those willing to give seventy-five dollars receive "premium padded chair seating," a "personal waiter," "complimentary top shelf liquor," and "VIP treatment."

<sup>42</sup>My local parish bulletin once included an advertisement in the form of a letter from a child begging her parents to buy her a ride bracelet for \$25 so that she could ride all day at the parish carnival, a popular, and increasingly expensive, event in middle class parishes.



efforts to build relationships with those who are poor.<sup>43</sup> Few programs exist to bring families together to live out their vocation to the world.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, marriage and family as we know them provide a busy life but not a fully satisfying or significant one. Instead of integrating the personal and the political, families spend their lives serving the needs of those whom Dean Brackley provocatively calls, “the middle class tribe.”<sup>45</sup> Catholic parishes do not form families into strong communities because they are bigger, less unified, and too invested in activities that fail to encourage alternative ways of life. They unwittingly help sustain a culture in which upward mobility remains unquestioned, social justice is accepted as a good idea but not an essential part of daily life, and wrestling with ethical decisions in the context of Christian faith is rare. It should not be surprising that most families are unable to sustain the communion and solidarity to which they are called.

#### ANOTHER WAY OF BEING FAMILY

If families are to sustain a different way of life, they will need more than the spiritual comfort and friendliness they are currently getting from most parishes.<sup>46</sup> One of the most important thing parishes can do for families is to help them to live out their Christian calling in and outside the home—not by downplaying the significance of family, but by striving to transform it. John F. Kavanaugh writes that, “the entire life of Christ, is a testimony received in faith that we are redeemed by a God-made-vulnerable in loving creation, and that we are fulfilled only in our irreplaceably unique self-donation.”<sup>47</sup> Parishes should be about nothing less than calling Catholics to practice that donation of selves in all aspects of their lives.

First, parishes should actively encourage upwardly mobile Catholic spouses to critically reflect on the pace of middle-class family life and discern how to resist it so that they have time to build communion among themselves. All who

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<sup>43</sup>The most common social services offered by parishes are ministry in nursing homes or hospitals, but it is not clear how many parishioners participate in these off-site ministries. Next are cash or voucher assistance and food pantries, programs that may be run by pastors and parish staff. Participation in direct service to the poor such as prison ministry and substance abuse counseling is low (Celio, “Celebrating Catholic Parishes,” 11).

<sup>44</sup>Groups that help people see the connection between their faith and their lives include Christian Life Communities, Focolare, and the Community of Sant’ Egidio. However, only about 5% of Catholics are involved in this kind of group (Bernard J. Lee, with William V. D’Antonio et al., *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 10).

<sup>45</sup>Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 37.

<sup>46</sup>Warren, *Faith, Culture, and the Worshipping Community*, 118.

<sup>47</sup>Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 122.

labor in home or outside it need space to think about the place of work in their lives. Parents need to be in conversation with other parents about how much extracurricular activity is too much. If communion in families is to be sustained, time to be together without hurry is crucial. The relationship between the spouses that John Paul II seeks cannot come about when spouses are too busy, both outside the home and in it, to pay attention to the other. Churches have a responsibility to help their members let go of certain middle class assumptions about what makes a good life and imagine new ways of being together.<sup>48</sup>

Second, parishes and pastors should be encouraged to develop ties that bind parishioners more closely in community. Without strong community, Catholics lack a place to be challenged in ways that will help them stand apart from the excesses of American middle class life. Central to parish life should be the development of small faith-sharing groups where adults can reflect on the struggles of creating counter-cultural households, pray, and serve the poor together.<sup>49</sup> However, parishes must also find ways to build community among the majority who are unable to commit to such groups, by encouraging other activities that build interdependence. David Matzko McCarthy writes that a wedding ought to bind a couple within and to a church community.<sup>50</sup> Through encouraging the sharing of time and resources, parishes can bind families closer together. Strong friendships are unlikely to develop if parishioners only see each other at ball games, carnivals, and progressive dinners. Parishioners need ways to come together around common interests more significant than the good of their “middle class tribe.”

Third, parishes can build on this communion to place alternative practices at the center of community life, so that they can help families practice solidarity with those who are not middle class.<sup>51</sup> There are many practices we might consider, but I will focus briefly here on the essential practice of service.<sup>52</sup> If parishioners’ energies are not tapped out from more mundane activities, they may

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<sup>48</sup>The Ekklesia Project aims to grow counter-cultural churches from below. See <[www.ekklesiaproject.org](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org)>.

<sup>49</sup>A good model is the Christian Family Movement, <[www.cfm.org](http://www.cfm.org)>. However, small communities that include households of all kinds can also be good vehicles for critical analysis of culture, spiritual support, and communal action.

<sup>50</sup>David Matzko McCarthy, “Becoming One Flesh: Marriage, Remarriage, and Sex,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 276.

<sup>51</sup>The U.S. Bishops have called parishes to increase social ministry in several documents, including *Communities of Salt and Light* (1993) and *Called to Global Solidarity* (1997). Tom Ulrich, *Parish Social Ministry: Strategies for Success* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2001) provides a helpful how-to guide but does not address the particular concerns of families.

<sup>52</sup>In my forthcoming book, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians*, I examine the practices of sex, prayer, tithing, eating, and service.

be more available for ongoing commitments to people in need. Service should be central to parish life and family life simply because it is crucial to Christian life. In *Ecclesia in America*, John Paul II argues that encountering Christ in the poor will reveal the truth of our interdependence and lead to genuine solidarity with the needy.<sup>53</sup> Convinced that only encounter leads to true conversion, he returns again and again to the theme of finding Christ in the poor, whose suffering recalls Christ's suffering.<sup>54</sup> John Paul II directs his listeners to spend time with people in need, assuring them that the practice of direct service is essential to Christian faith. When people are hungry, suffering from violence, without shelter, of all the things families could choose to do on a Saturday afternoon, service should have priority.

Despite the imperatives from the tradition, the reality of human need, and the potential to change lives, families have often been excused from service. Perhaps they are asked to fill food baskets for Thanksgiving or adopt a family for Christmas, but most of year, most of the time, the service families engage in is directed toward their own families, schools, and parishes—their middle class tribe. Because those groups are often homogeneous, the needy remain untouched on the other side of town. Families, it is thought, cannot be asked to bear another burden, and generally, they are not asked to do so. Kavanaugh challenges this norm by insisting on the value of “continuing and regular contact with the very poor, the dying, the lonely, the handicapped.”<sup>55</sup>

Too often, the call to direct service is limited to singles and those who have chosen religious life as a vocation. However, the needs of the poor and the deficiencies of middle class family life call for the inclusion of families in the work of service. Excusing families limits the ability of the church to address the needs of the poor and limits the ability of families to live out their Christian vocation in the world. It is time to acknowledge that focus on the family in middle class communities is far from adequate. Instead, Christian family life ought to be centered on practices directed to solidarity.

Integrating service into Christian family life will only be possible if parishes commit to sustaining a culture in which the demands of Christian discipleship trump those of middle class culture. If parishes strive to become places of transformation, families will have a chance of becoming what they are called to be in the contemporary Catholic tradition. Families must take up the challenge of Christian life through investing in a parish community and adopting distinctive practices that link the personal and political. They will be more likely to find the fullness they seek in richer relationships at home, in community with fellow believers, and in solidarity with those in need. This challenge is relevant to all who care deeply about Christian faith, but it is particularly important to a new

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<sup>53</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1999), no. 52.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 12.

<sup>55</sup>Kavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 189.

generation of theologians who seek a life that honors the significance of home and calls its inhabitants to a mission beyond it.

### CONNECTING SOLIDARITY AND COMMUNION

It is my firm belief that Catholic social teaching will never penetrate the church unless and until it goes through families. Yet, some ask how practices of solidarity would affect the internal life of communion among family members. What, if anything, do social practices contribute to a personalist vision of marriage and family?

I would argue that families who engage in practices like direct service are likely to find that encountering the poor aids their personal communion instead of detracting from it, for three reasons: Service puts people in touch with their privilege, connects them to their vulnerability, and challenges their confusion about what is important in life.

Direct service encourages a recognition of privilege and engenders gratitude. Safe within the confines of middle class neighborhoods, it is easy to feel as though everyone has as much or more than we do. Everyone we know is “struggling” to keep up with bills for tuition, home remodeling, the yearly vacation, etc. But walking into a shelter or soup kitchen throws our privilege into sharp relief. We are suddenly conscious of the value of what we wear and carry. Encountering those who are truly struggling enables us to see differently, to appreciate better the people and things in our lives.

Working directly with the poor reveals not only our privilege, but also our poverty. Those who are wounded, Kavanaugh says, “have an unequalled power to educate us to our pretenses, our fears, and the rejection of our humanity . . . They bear the wounds of humanity, visible before all, reminding us of our most dependent, fragile beginnings, of our diminishment and our dying, of our ultimate inability to manage and control either our bodies or our world.”<sup>56</sup> In coming to know their poverty we recognize our needs. This recognition of human incompleteness that comes in service to the marginalized makes possible growth in love.<sup>57</sup> Service can enable us to approach relationships with family and friends with greater humility and willingness to sacrifice. Service is practice in love, a school of virtue with the potential to transform the lives of givers and receivers.

Those who are members of the “middle class tribe” need contact with those who struggle daily to survive in order to realize how the comforts of middle class society “induce in us a chronic low-grade confusion about what is really important in life: namely, life itself and love.”<sup>58</sup> Those who are poor can teach us how

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 204. Knowing the truth of our humanity—our incompleteness—allows us to be vulnerable and radically open to relationships, according to Kavanaugh.

<sup>58</sup>Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 37.

to live with gratitude and joy despite finitude and suffering.<sup>59</sup> Knowing those with so little who are able to laugh, sing, and hope can enable a new gratitude and joy to take root in us. This, too, can overflow in a willingness to sacrifice for each other born of the knowledge that our lives are very good. Laetitia Bordes notes that North Americans who went to El Salvador in the 1980s to accompany the poor, often “discovered that it was the poor who accompanied them and led them to a greater depth in their heart, a depth that lay unexplored, to find there treasures they never dreamed existed.”<sup>60</sup> They are grateful for how the forgiving love of people who had been victimized by the policies of the United States freed them to become more loving in their own lives.<sup>61</sup> In their accompaniment, they found meaning and communion that the middle class tribe often lacks. One volunteer in El Salvador writes, “I feel an exuberance in being alive and being where I am. I feel like I am just being born, that there is new life in me. And it is related to feeling a part of the struggle for life here, of feeling connected to others because we are putting our energy towards a broader vision beyond just our individual selves.”<sup>62</sup>

Having just returned from two weeks in Nicaragua with my students, I am beginning to understand better this point of view. I am more convinced than ever that Jon Sobrino is right to declare that salvation can only come from the poor,<sup>63</sup> because being with those who have little and yet give much breaks through the numbness that is the sickness of our middle class tribe, allowing joy, sadness, community, and meaning to seep in. This, it seems to me, is exactly the sort of practice that ought to be encouraged by a new generation theologians seeking an authentic Christian life not just for saintly singles, but for the great majority of Christians who marry, raise children, and live out their vocation in the world.

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<sup>59</sup>Brackley speaks of the joy and gratitude he has learned from the poor, in *Call to Discernment*, 201, 214.

<sup>60</sup>*Our Hearts Were Broken: A Spirituality of Accompaniment*, ed. Laetitia Bordes, 62 (Red Star Black Rose, 2000).

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 76-77.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 145. Christine Reesor quotes from her journal entry on December 9, 1988.

<sup>63</sup>In “Letter to Ignacio Ellacuría,” reprinted in *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), Sobrino puts it this way, “From [the poor] and with [the poor] we can build a human universalism. Without them, all universalizing movements, from globalization to religious ecumenism, can offer nothing but clichés: to work for the common good, to promote the universal desire for peace, to come together around a single God or a human ideal . . . That is all well and good, but is not enough. Unless we make the poor central, there is no axis on which humanity can turn ‘humanly.’ Humanity for the most part will merely be a ‘species,’ with strong and weak members, and the strong eating the weak. With the poor as the axis, humanity would turn in a different way; it would turn as a ‘family’” (224).