

# Strengthening Catholic Identity through the Family

By Christopher Cole

Reflecting, reading, or simple prayer is a bit tough for me these days; I am living the chaos that is a family in bloom. I stare at a monitor as it flips between two sleeping boys, ages three and one-and-a-half. My wife holds the two-week-old in the other room, trying to get her to sleep. I fight to keep my eyes open as I read the clock: eight o'clock at night. I'm looking forward to being well rested in fifteen years, but until then, coffee is my best friend. My wife and I will be celebrating four years of marriage in a few months as well. In the blink of an eye, I was a bachelor, and not long before that a seminarian praying and discerning God's will for my life.

In those not so distant days, I spent a good amount of time in prayer. Each morning and evening was devoted to the liturgy of the hours. Adoration was a common practice and walking with the Lord at any given moment a frequent endeavor. It was easy for me to constantly practice my faith and identify as a Catholic. From my point of view, I was a pretty holy guy, trying to become holier every day. Flash forward to today and I laugh: man oh man was my train about to be derailed. I was about to be blindsided unaware of what was about to hit me.

I know I am not alone in this. Countless people have made the joke about sleep, or the chaos, or the circus that is the early years of a family. Some are about to experience it, some are in the middle of it as I am, and some remember those days - grateful for them and grateful to be done with them. Many of us in the midst of family life find it a struggle to pay much attention to God's workings in our lives. We have grocery runs and bed time, nap time and chores. Sometimes getting the family to Mass on Sunday itself is the only direct encounter with God, and even that is a struggle. How is there time to really work at living as a good Catholic when we are just trying to survive living as a family? I was at a moment of crisis when all that I did to identify as a 'good' Catholic was suddenly gone from my practice and impossible to regularly do again. Family life had dissolved my Catholic identity and I was lost as to how I would ever gain it back...or so I thought.

This however is not the case. I would like to propose that a faithful, Catholic family does not weaken or destroy your Catholic identity, but instead strengthens it. There are many

characteristics of our identity that can be strengthened in the family, but I would like to focus on three in particular: Trinitarian, Paschal, and Sacramental.

God is love (1 John 4:8). One of the greatest lines of all scripture. It is God's very being. Love cannot be isolated, solitary, individualized or contained. As we understand God, we more deeply understand love. God is a community of persons. God is three in one. We describe the love of the Father and Son to be so infinite, so giving, that the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is the outpouring of the love between them. When reflecting on love, we see it is a giving of all one has to another. Love necessarily is self-giving to the infinite extreme. It is also life-giving. Love (Himself) is what created the world! Love is what saved us from our sins. Love is for the other. Our marriages are called to emulate God himself. Our marriages are a reflection of that giving love of God's very being. Husband and wife are called to give ourselves to each other, as the Father and Son show us. In our marriages, self-love is called to give way to selfless love. Our love is also called to be life giving. That gift of love has the potential to bring about a new life nine months later. The love we promise to give in matrimony overflows to create a family, just as God's superabundant love compelled the Trinity to make man in His own image in the creation story. So in the midst of the family life, the waking up early for our children, or patiently waiting for a spouse to get ready for a date, we strengthen our Catholic identity. As we ourselves disappear into service of our children and spouses, we disappear into the life of the Trinity. With every passing moment in which we die to ourselves, our own wills and desires, we reflect our God who is love.

This leads the way to our second means of strengthening our Catholic identity through the family: sacrifice. Many Christian communities have a cross someplace prevalent. Catholics have a crucifix. We have crosses sure, but why the crucifix? Why hold onto Jesus dead on the cross when we can simply have a cross and focus on Christ risen? As Catholics, we recognize that the greatest moment of our salvation is right there, as God himself pours forth his unending love through the pain and suffering. Sacrifice is an essential element of Catholicism. Not sacrifice without cause but suffering and sacrifice that is redemptive. It brings about salvation. The cross has no meaning without the Resurrection, but there is also no Resurrection without the cross. We look to the cross and see Christ, freely offering all. He suffered in the garden, knew what He was going to take on. It would be no walk in the park, but it was worth it. We don't skip past or gloss over the passion. We partake in the Stations of the Cross during Lent. We kiss the cross on Good Friday and reflect on the scourging at the pillar. Why do we do these things? Why can't we just focus on the Resurrection? As

Catholics, we recognize the reality of sin and the reality of pain. We know that it is there, but we are able to carry our crosses with Christ. We can suffer with Christ, knowing that this is an offering that brings about new life. How many of us as fathers and mothers wouldn't easily take on all the suffering of our sick child so they could be healthy again? As a family, we encounter crosses, pain, and suffering all the time. In the midst of life, we may sometimes feel the weight of our crosses. As a husband trying to provide financially for his family. As a stay-at-home mom trying to corral three young children who are tired and hungry. As a couple trying to comfort a child who has a cold or a toddler with an injured hand. Without Christ and his example through his passion and death, we may simply see darkness and dread in these moments. With Christ, we are able to encounter him, walk with him, suffer with him, and offer up our suffering for those we love more easily. Christ's words echo clearly hear, 'my yoke is easy, my burden light'. (Mt 11:20) How light the burden is when there is meaning, when we get rid of self and take it on for others! We recognize that even Christ had to walk through the trials for the sake of love, so we too, with every cross we encounter in the family are able to be more Christ-like. These sacrifices and pains we encounter enable us to strengthen our Catholic identity and be a light of love in the midst of darkness.

When I think of what sets Catholics apart from other faithful Christians, our sacramental view of life stands out. We are a sacramental people. It penetrates down to the deepest parts of our being. We may not even realize how the sacramental nature of Catholicism affects us. Christ is the sacrament of God, the face of the Father. We encounter Christ in the Eucharist. We encounter grace in the Church. Baptism brings about the invisible grace of salvation. We encounter the invisible God through these visible means. Often times we think about grace and sacrament in only these seven encounters. We can learn from Blessed Mother Teresa who for years spoke of encountering Christ in the dying on the streets of Calcutta. As husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, we too encounter Christ in a similar way. We encounter him in our children, and in our spouses. We come into contact with grace when we come into contact with them. We are called to see Christ through them, in them, and with them. There is temptation to sometimes see our children as a burden, our wives or husbands as simply an obligation. These are lies in as much as God sees us, his children, as a waste or worthless. Quite the opposite, we, the lowly sinners as we were, were seen by the Father as his prodigal children. We were worthy to give it all up for, to become man, suffer and die for. We encounter grace through the sacraments. We also encounter God through our family. As we strive to see God in our families in the same way God views us, we will become people more fully alive, for we will become the people God created us to be, given to grace and

imitating Christ, who is God made man. Then, as we view the Church as a beacon of salvation, communion, love, and sanctification, we can view our families, the domestic church in the same way. We will not only encounter grace within our own members, but we will be an encounter with God to the families, friends, and strangers who come into contact with us.

As my sons and daughter grow, and the chaos of family life becomes calmer, I look forward to picking up those religious practices again. We are not defined however by how many rosaries we say or how often we pray the liturgy of the hours. Our Catholic identity reaches beyond acts we perform or prayers we pray. We are formed by God, and we live out a Catholic identity through that formation. Some of the most core values of Catholicism are strengthened within the confines of the family. We are a community of persons, given in love, reflecting the triune God. We are a people of the paschal mystery, celebrating the Resurrection and participating in Christ's passion and death through our family struggles. Finally, we are a people who encounter God and his grace through the visible world around us, most especially through the members of our family. The Church, the body of Christ, is the sacrament of communion and salvation, for through it we become one in Him and receive sanctification poured out to us from Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The family is often called the 'domestic church' and we can see those same sacramental elements within its walls. Truly we are the domestic Church. Our families are a great means of growing in our Catholic identity and holiness. I look forward to teaching my children the wonderful cultural practices, devotional prayers, and liturgical celebrations that make Catholicism so rich and beautiful. At the same time, I know that I can be strengthened as a Catholic through my own domestic Church in each and every encounter I have.

*Christopher Cole is a native of Houston and was a parishioner of St. John Vianney in his childhood years. He currently is in his sixth year teaching theology at Strake Jesuit. He combines those duties with coordinating educational technology at the school. Chris attended Texas A&M University before transferring to Franciscan University in Steubenville Ohio to pursue a double major in Theology and Catechetics. He subsequently earned a Master's degree in Theological Studies from the University of St. Thomas. Prior to his work at Strake Jesuit, he worked for the transformative family ministry Paradisus Dei, That Man is You, before spending two years discerning God's vocation at St. Mary's seminary here in Houston. Chris is a father of three living out the vocation of matrimony. Chris is also the son of SJV's parishioners Paula and David Cole.*