

When from an Exile (id 15) I just recently had one of those experiences of serendipity: a conversation with a visitor about a certain topic, and then a couple of days later coming across an article on the same topic — the point being that the topic in question is a ~~perhaps~~ ^{quite} unusual one, certainly not one you hear much (if anything) about, normally. My visitor-friend, an Englishman, has rather depressing and despairing views about society and religion in his country, and about the effectiveness and the future of the Catholic church in England, committed and active Catholic tho' he and his family are. The only hope and solution he would see is in the faith and sacramental life becoming family-based. We talked a bit about that idea: then some days later an article caught my eye, 'A Family Ecclesiology' — that is, an understanding and a theology of the Church as family. As the writer remarked, a critical insight in the teachings of the 2nd Veb. Council has been passed over by virtually every major theologian working in the field of the theology of the Church. It's a good and an interesting point, which does deserve attention and some prayerful reflection by all of us connected with Christian education, pastoral work, spirituality, indeed the general mission to share and to spread the good news + God's word. So, if what I want to say to you today is rather more historical and theological than spiritual or devotional, you will (I hope) take it as something for reflection and for praying about, and to lead on to some deeper understanding and to prayerful support for Christian families that you know, and your own family too. It is true (as the article said) that you can search through all the highly influential works (in the English language anyway) of writers like Hans King, Avery Dulles, Richard McBrien, and find little if any awareness of the Vatican 2 vision of the family as "the domestic church"

The local church, or the parish, is nearly always taken as the bottom line, structurally and theologically. Maybe this also reflects the clerical and religious order domination in the Catholic church: but families themselves (my article-writer points out) often realize intuitively that their faith makes little sense apart from what goes on in their daily experience of family relationships. They know that the family is, so to say, the foundational church: it's within the family that the foundational experiences of the Christian life happen best, for both children and adults: it's within family relationships that (for most people) faith takes on flesh. For the Vatican Council to call the family "the domestic church" was nothing original: the conviction that the family is the most basic religious community pre-dates Christianity. In Jewish traditions the home, not the synagogue, is the centre of religious life. When the earliest Christians were banned from the synagogues they naturally gravitated to private homes: and by the 4th century St John Chrysostom was referring to the family as "church". In more recent times, Pope Leo 13th wrote that "the family is the first form of the church on earth". Significantly too, the bishops at the second Veb. Council decided to discuss the family not as a separate topic but in the context of their document about the church. Since then, Pope Paul 6th often used the idea of the family as the domestic church and, in his much-discussed exhortation on evangelisation, said that "there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire church". The present Pope also has said that the family is meant to "constitute the church in its fundamental dimension". One theologian who has written of the married couple, cornerstone of the traditional nuclear family, as an authentic form of church is Karl Rahner.

"In marriage", he says, "the church is made present. It is really the smallest community, the smallest but at the same time the true community of the redeemed and the sanctified --- in other words, the smallest but at the same time the genuine individual church." Reflect a while on all this, with a prayer for your own and other families you're close to: and let's listen now to this prayer in music: "If the Lord Does not build"

Earthen Vessels
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MUSIC-PRAYERS

Not only

is the church, but in society as a whole the family needs support and strengthening these days: and while people say "yes" to this, families continue to be under very great pressures of all kinds, and find it difficult even to survive as families, ... and people wonder what's been going wrong with our societies. As for Christian and religious life, the pressures of modern secular customs and mores, the materialist life-style of the kind of western civilisation we're part of, here in HK, make it more obvious and important that it's basically in a whole and healthy family life an environment that faith will be nourished and grow. Without such support it will be immensely more difficult. So the family itself needs to be taken more seriously by the official church as the foundational church, and helped as such. Families nowadays are being far more effectively "evangelised" by a secular culture than they are by the church. And if parishes are languishing, surely it's because the families of which they're largely made up even still, here in HK too, the families' are not being nourished and encouraged as the basic unit they are. Christingly as well as humanly, the domestic church in reality. Pray for Christian families, as families, where 2, 3, 4 are gathered together in Jesus' name