

Domestic Church

St. Pope John Paul II:

The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in the celebration of the sacraments, is the living source and inexhaustible sustenance of the supernatural communion that gathers believers and links them with Christ and with each other in the unity of the Church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called "the domestic Church."

All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family "a school of deeper humanity": this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows." (Familiaris Consortio, 21)

The Domestic Monastery

By Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI, in the Seattle, WA, The Catholic Northwest Progress, Jan. 18, 2001. The article has been modified.

Carlo Carretto, one of the leading spiritual writers of the past century, lived for more than a dozen years as a hermit in the Sahara Desert. Alone, with only the Blessed Sacrament for company, milking a goat for his food, and translating the Bible into the local Bedouin language, he prayed for long hours by himself.

Returning to Italy one day to visit his mother, he came to a startling realization. His mother, who for more than 30 years of her life had been so busy raising a family that she scarcely ever had a private minute for herself, was more contemplative than he was. Carretto, though, was careful to draw the right lesson from this. He did not conclude that there was something wrong with his life as a hermit. The lesson was that there was something wonderfully right about what his mother had been doing all these years as she lived the interrupted life amid the noise and incessant demands of a husband and small children. He had been in a monastery, but so had she.

What is a monastery? A monastery is a place consecrated to God, a place to live in silence, to allow God to speak, and to bring us to intimate union with Him; a place where time is not ours; a place where we live for others. Monasteries may be inhabited by celibates. There are also domestic monasteries where this is lived secretly, caring for noisy children and doing house chores. Yet this kind of "monk" finds, in the inner silence of the heart, union with the interior martyrdom of Christ, which creates the necessary rhythm to find God in the daily routines.

St. John of the Cross described the essence of monasticism in these words: "But they, O my God and my life, will see and experience Your mild touch, who withdraw from the world and become meek, bringing the meek into harmony with the meek, thus enabling themselves to

experience and enjoy You." John gives us here three elements of a monastery: 1- withdrawal from the world, 2-bringing oneself into harmony with the meek and 3- enabling self to experience and enjoy God .

The mother who stays home with small children can fit the above description: 1- She experiences a real withdrawal from the world. Her tasks and preoccupations are far from the centers of power and what is considered important by the world. 2- She spends many hours with children, the meekest of the meek (though at times they may not seem so meek!). But not all homes are domestic monasteries. The third element is also needed: "Enabling self to experience and enjoy God". She needs to believe that God wants her to live this grace. Then she needs to cooperate by entering a way of life consecrated to God, a discipline of love which few ever develop. This is why it is very valuable to belong to a community committed to this way of life, where there is mutual support and accompaniment.

The demands of young children also provide her with what St. Bernard, one of the great architects of monasticism, called the "monastic bell". All monasteries have a bell. Bernard, in writing his rules for monasticism, told his monks that whenever the monastic bell rang, they were to drop whatever they were doing and go immediately to the particular activity (Prayer, meals, work, study, sleep) to which the bell was summoning them. He was adamant that they respond immediately, stating that if they were writing a letter they were to stop in mid-sentence when the bell rang.

The idea is that the monk responds immediately, even when you desire to do something else, because time belongs to God. For him, the monastic bell was intended as a discipline to stretch the heart by always taking you beyond your own agenda to God's agenda.

Hence, a mother rearing children, perhaps in a more privileged way even than a professional contemplative, is forced, almost against her will, to constantly stretch her heart. For years, while rearing children, her time is never her own, her own needs have to be kept in second place, and every time she turns around a hand is reaching out and demanding something. She hears the monastic bell many times during the day and she has to drop things in mid-sentence and respond, not because she wants to, but because it's time for that activity and time isn't her time, but God's time.

The principles of monasticism are time-tested, saint-sanctioned, and altogether trustworthy. But there are different kinds of monasteries, different ways of putting ourselves into harmony with the meek, and different kinds of monastic bells.

Response to duty can be monastic prayer, a needy hand can be a monastic bell, and working without status and power can constitute a withdrawal into a monastery where God can meet us. The domestic can be the monastic.

Bible readings:

Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land. -Matthew 5:5

Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls.-Matthew 11:29

Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, Meek, and riding upon an ass, And upon a colt the foal of an ass. -Matthew 21:5