

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND ITS ROLE IN ANSWERING RELIGIOUS CALL

Emmanuel N. Ogu, OP (Ph.D)¹

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role family background plays in nurturing vocations. The family as we know is a domestic church. It is the first school of faith where children learn to recognize the call of God. Vocation is fundamentally the following of Jesus in his radical way of life unto the cross. This requires the use of freedom that is totally for nothing else than pure self-giving love. Additionally, it talks about the importance of family prayer, catechesis and parents as the first witnesses of vocation love to their children.

The family is a vital part of the process of life long faith formation at all stages of faith development; and that parents need to assume their roles in fostering faith and a deeper spirituality within their homes. It is within the heart of the family that the call to a radical following of Jesus is frequently heard. There the mystery of vocation, of God calling individuals for consecration and mission, is born, fostered and encouraged, nourished and guided. Family background is an important consideration in human formation and for a solid foundation. For example, Saul was a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents and was brought up in the Law of Moses. One aspect of the family is to inspire children to discern and follow their own chosen vocations from God. The Church understands family to mean a domestic Church, the basic unit of society in which God is worshipped and relationships formed. We recognized that parents are the first educators of their children, providing the foundation for a spiritual and religious life. That is why the family is the first school of faith in which children learn to recognize the call of God and respond to it.

Formation in the family is fundamental and foundational in responding to this call. The child born into a family starts early to imbibe the ethos of the family as we see in the boy Saul. It is here that the first school of faith begins for the child as we see in the boy Saul. Thus the family is the first school of faith where children learn to recognize the call of the Lord and respond to it. The young Samuel in the scripture heard the voice of the Lord in the quiet of the Temple², so the family provides a holy space in which the Lord's voice may echo and be recognized in the hearts and souls of their children. The Church documents used creative terms to describe the family; some of the terms are "natural and fundamental school for faith formation," the first experience of the Church.

¹ Rev.Fr. Emmanuel N. Ogu, OP (Ph.D) currently teaches at the Dominican Institute, Ibadan, and is also the Student-Master of the Dominican Student brothers in formation for his Order.

² 1 Sam. 3

We know that the core teaching of the Second Vatican council is the radical call of all to holiness. However, we also know that God calls a chosen few, that should be many, to follow him even more closely in a life of apostolic celibacy for the kingdom of God, whether it be as a priest, religious, or layperson. The founder of Opus Dei once remarked that those called by God own ninety percent of their vocation to their parents. The family is the seed-bed of vocations."³

Pope St. John Paul II posits that the role of family "as educators is decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on Parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs."⁴ Hence, the strength and stability of the family represents the condition for the growth and nourishment of vocations because stability creates an environment of harmony, love, and joy in which to discern spiritual realities.⁵

Parents are the first preachers of the faith to their children, a task that is carried out by words and by example. Smith, affirmed that the best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities. Childhood religiosity also fosters commitment to the Church – Catholics who learn to be religious when they are young find it relatively easy to claim their Catholic identity. They also come to appreciate the benefits of being Catholic.⁶ Thus parents who love their own vocation and love themselves are the best witnesses of vocational love to their children. Within the family values and motivations begins to be formed.

Vocations begin to be imbued with a deep Christian identity and mission. In the family the kingdom of God orientation of moral character starts. In sum, the quality of family life, of relationships within the family, either nourishes and fosters vocation or weakens and destroys it. Pope Francis avers that the Church highlights the role of intact families with two parents, both mother and father, playing complimentary roles of carrying out this mission of love, however the church has always manifested the greatest care for divided families and believes in the on-going witness of single mothers and fathers to their own children's faith and vocational discernment.⁷

³ John McCloskey, "The Family: Seedbed of Vocations" *Catholic City: The Mary Foundation*, <http://www.catholicity.com/mccloskey/familyvocations.html> (10 Aug. 2015).

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), n. 36

⁵ Pope Francis, "What the Popes Want Parents to Know about Vocation Promotion" *Vocation Boom*, <http://www.vocationboom.com/4725-2/> (August 10, 2015).

⁶ Smith Christian & Melinda Lundguist Denton, *Soul searching: The Religious and Spiritual lives of Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 34.

⁷ Pope Francis, "What the Popes Want Parents to Know about Vocation Promotion" *Vocation Boom*.

The family is the environment in which human personality and affective maturity are to be formed in children so as to prepare them for productive life as Christian adults and citizens (Pope Francis). It is the duty of parents to impart this catechesis to their children. Also, it is their duty to accompany young people struggling to choose their proper vocation. The Church documents also “places a high value on the parents’ cooperation in the work of Christian formation with educators and pastors. Perhaps it is best to say that Parish catechetical programs and schools are encouraged to cooperate and coordinate with parents who have the primary responsibility for and authority over their children’s education.”⁸

A child who receives the integral formation in his/her family will be ready to discern the vocation proper to him/her. Families are the seed-beds for religious vocation. Children whose parents practice their faith are the ones most likely to hear and respond to Christ’s invitation to follow him in the consecrated life.⁹ Youth in families where faith is often expressed by Parents in word and deed are three times more likely to participate in Church activities and spend time helping others. Families that express their faith also have an impact on participation in Church life and activities. It is evident that youth who are most likely to respond to God’s invitation to consecrated life are those raised in homes where faith is part of the normal ebb and flow of family life.

Pope Francis stressed the importance of prayer by saying that, the role of prayer in the family is indispensable, not only for the growth of the life of faith but most especially in the planting and growth of a religious vocation, which in itself will be dedicated to the ministry of prayer and liturgy in future. The church looks at the family as the first seminary or formation, because it is in the family that children acquire piety, prayer and of love for the church.¹⁰ The family is an intimate environment where good attitude and behaviour are transmitted and acquired. Thus formation in the family is fundamental and foundational for a child to discern his or her proper vocation in life. Parents are encouraged to pray with one another and with their family, so that abundant blessing may come upon their family and marriage love and thus find a full expression of its spiritual fruitfulness.

Pope St. John Paul II says that “We must remember that if parents do not live the values of the gospel, the young man or woman will find it very difficult to discern the calling, to understand the need for the sacrifices which must be faced, and to appreciate the beauty of the goal to be achieved.”¹¹ Hence, parents need to have a sense of vocation and mission themselves to pass on to their children. Religious practices in the home virtually double the probability of a youth responding to the

⁸ Pope Francis, “What the Popes Want Parents to Know about Vocation Promotion” *Vocation Boom*.

⁹ Butler, Sara; “Families foster openness to religious life”, 2015

¹⁰ Pope Francis, “What the Popes Want Parents to Know about Vocation Promotion” *Vocation Boom*.

¹¹ Pope St. John Paul II, *The Consecrated Life: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata* (1996), n. 107

call to serve the Lord. The more children participate in religious activities and develop a sense that religion is an important part of their lives, the more they are likely to have close personal relationships with God and the more they are likely to learn about the major developments such as Vatican II, both of which foster adherence to Church's teachings. The two most important influences on youths responding to God's invitation are having parents who talk to them about religion and having religious educators and catechists who are effective in their ministry. Their commitment to Catholic practices needs to be firm and consistent. That means attending Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, arranging their children's catechetical instruction and sending them to Catholic schools. Parents received their children from God and must be willing to give them back to God for the service of his people.

Finally, the contextualized and holistic family formation is essential for answering the religious call. The family witness through prayer and active participation in the church, provides a good home for nurturing vocation. Thus parents' commitment to Catholic practices needs to be firm and consistent. Above all, the active enlivening, integrating and uniting work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of charisms and vocation is needed to enable an individual answer the call.

ENDNOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butler, Sara. "Families foster openness to religious life, 2015
- McCloskey, John. "The Family: Seedbed of Vocations, 2015: The Mary Foundation, CatholiCity.
- Pope Francis. "Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 77; 2013
- Pope St. John Paul II. "Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*; 1981
- Pope St. John Paul II. "The Consecrated Life: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrate*; 1996
- Smith, Christian & Melinda Lundquist Denton. "Soul searching: The Religious and Spiritual lives of Teenagers 2005. NY: Oxford University Press.