

Raising a  
Catholic Family  
Today

Building a Domestic Church

A Handbook for Parents

John Bosio

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IMPRIMATUR

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## DEDICATION

To my parents and grandparents,  
my extended family,  
the circle of friends and neighbors,  
teachers, priests, and nuns,  
who were part of the village  
that formed me as a child.

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I am fortunate to have such good friends.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AL	Amoris Laetitia ( <i>The Joy of Love</i> ) – Pope Francis
CARA	Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
DCE	Deus Caritas Est – Pope Benedict XVI
EG	Evangelii Gaudium ( <i>The Joy of the Gospel</i> ) – Pope Francis
EN	Evangelii Nuntiandi ( <i>In Proclaiming the Gospel</i> ) – Pope Paul VI
FC	Familiaris Consortio ( <i>On the Family</i> ) – Pope John Paul II
GS	Gaudium at Spes ( <i>Joy and Hope</i> ) – Second Vatican Council
LL	Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan - USCCB



“Parents must learn to form their family as a ‘domestic church,’ a church of the home as it were, where God is honored, his law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems, and suffering of everyone else.”

St. John Paul II

(Homily at Aqueduct Racetrack, Brooklyn, New York, October 6, 1995)



## INTRODUCTION

### **Be Intentional**

It was 4:00 on a Wednesday afternoon. A gentle knock at the door of my office caught my attention. “Come in!” I said. An elderly lady appeared at the entrance, walking slowly, and leaning on a cane. I got up to meet her. She stopped. “Sir, can I speak to you?”

“Sure! Sit down, please,” I replied, pointing to a chair.

The woman introduced herself as Maggie and explained, “I just dropped off two students attending your religious education program.” I was the director of the religious education programs at the parish where we met. With a smile, she continued, “You probably know ‘them-boys’ because they have a tendency to get into trouble.” I nodded. I knew who she was talking about. Paul was in the second grade, and Jack was in the fourth. She continued, “I don’t know if you are aware of this, but both of their parents are in jail. I am their grandmother, and I take care of them. My husband passed. I feel very strongly about making sure that they are raised Catholic.”

She paused to take a breath and then continued, “When my daughter had these children baptized, she promised that she would raise them Catholic. She is not here right now, so I am fulfilling her responsibility. I want them to grow up knowing the difference between

right and wrong and to develop habits that will serve them well in life. Faith in God and the practice of the sacraments have been a good guide and the source of strength for me throughout my life. I want the same for them.”

“So, you bring them to religious education classes. What else do you do to raise them Catholic?” I asked. “I take them to Mass every Sunday. We pray together at home. I read bible stories and stories about the saints. And that is why I came to see you today. Do you have any simple books on the lives of the saints I can borrow?”

“Yes, of course!” I replied.

“What else do you do to pass on your faith?” I asked.

Maggie continued, “I tell them that God is with them all the time, and they can turn to him for help. And, of course, I pay close attention to the friends they associate with and what they learn in public school.”

We spoke for almost an hour.

This exchange happened over 50 years ago, a time when raising a Catholic family for a single grandmother required significant effort. Today, unfortunately, her task would be even more demanding. Fifty years ago, our Catholic faith and Christian values were more respected by society in general. In addition, social media and the Internet had not dawned, and cell phones were not available to children.

Unlike 50 years ago, today’s society ignores and disregards our Catholic tradition, and many of the values our children are exposed to on TV, in school, on the Internet, and through social media are in conflict with our Catholic principles. Some authors write that we live in a post-Christian world where Judeo-Christian values no longer define the culture. Other forces, like the currents in a river, are influencing our lives and shaping what we believe. As a society, we are drifting away from God. Sad to say, this is a phenomenon that is

experienced in all developed countries today.

Pope Francis, speaking to the Roman Curia in 2019, said, “Christendom no longer exists! Today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront or those most listened to... faith is often rejected, derided, marginalized and ridiculed” (12-21-1919). Catholic children attending public schools or visiting friends are exposed to situations that do not align with what they are taught at home. These experiences can confuse them. Parents need to be able to guide young inquisitive minds in the right direction.

The challenge faced by today’s families is well expressed in a metaphor used by Dr. William Doherty. He writes in his book, *The Intentional Family*, that starting a family is like launching a canoe into a great river, one that is fraught by many colliding currents. If you enter the waters without a clear plan and direction for your journey, the currents will take over your life, and you will not know where you will end up. To make progress in navigating the river of life, parents need to have a destination, a plan for how to get there, and the strength to paddle hard to stay on course. Raising a family is an intentional journey.

I hope this book can help you decide what your destination is, develop a plan to get there, and find the strength to paddle hard. Maggie, the grandmother I met 50 years ago, had a plan for her grandchildren, and she was trying hard to stay on course. Maggie was intentional about raising her family Catholic. Today, to raise a Catholic family, you too must be intentional. I want to repeat this because it is important: Raising a family to be Catholic today must be intentional. It requires a conscious decision to develop habits of prayer, regular attendance to the sacraments, and loving interaction among the members of our family that help build a home environment – a family culture in which faith is practiced and is passed on by example. Just going about life without making a conscious effort to pass on the faith, or just doing what everyone else does, can weaken our faith and cause the next generation to grow distant from the religious practices that

give direction and meaning to our life as Catholics in a culture that is increasingly less Christian.

The loss of faith is detrimental to your children's mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. An article published by the Marriage and Religion Research Institute (2-13-2021) reports the findings from studies in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and medicine on the influence of religion in our life. The researchers state that persons who practice their religion show greater ability to cope with the stresses and the hardships they encounter in their lives and are less likely to report depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance abuse.

Pope Francis told parents on the occasion of the baptism of their children: "The important thing is to transmit the faith with your life of faith; that they see the love between the spouses, that they see peace at home, that they see that Jesus is there." (1-13-2019)

## **Make Room for Jesus in Your Home**

Making a plan for your family's journey to holiness starts with inviting God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to be the navigator of your family's canoe. Invite Jesus to make the voyage with you and make room for him in your home.

When I was in the fifth grade and living in northern Italy, one morning after serving Mass, my pastor asked me, "Will you ask your parents if you can go with me to bless homes today?" So early that afternoon, we set out. I still see us walking on a small dusty country road. The priest wore his black cassock with a surplice, a white knee-length vestment. He had a black three-pointed hat called the biretta on his head, and he held a book in his hand. I walked alongside carrying a container with holy water. He said, "Today, we will visit the farmhouses just outside of town." At each stop, the priest gathered the families living there, whoever was not in the fields, and explained that he had come to bless their homes. This was an annual event, and they

were expecting him.

The people, mostly women and children and older persons living at the farm, assembled in the largest room, and the pastor explained, “Remember that we bless your houses each year to rededicate your homes and your families to God. God lives here with you. Let’s make room for him.”

The pastor’s message to his flock, “God lives here with you. Let’s make room for him,” has remained with me to this day. I hear it echoed in the words of Pope Francis, “The Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes” (AL 315).

These words, I believe, apply to all of our families. God dwells with us and fills our lives and our homes with truly amazing graces. It does not make a difference if our rooms are messy or clean, big or small; if our family relationships are peaceful or strained. Regardless of where we are in life, God is with us. The messiness of our lives and of our homes is our problem. God stands by us with his graces, waiting for us to turn to him for help. “Remember that you are never alone. Christ is with you on your journey every day of your lives” (St. John Paul II, 8-23-1997).

The two stories just recalled, the one of Maggie, and that of my pastor, capture the message of this book. Like Maggie, we as parents need to be intentional about passing our faith to our children. And, like my pastor said to his parishioners, we need to make room for God in our lives and in our homes.

## **The Plan**

I wrote this book to help you develop a plan for your family’s journey. It contains reflections and suggestions for action on six aspects of a Catholic family’s home life. The book will help you:

1. **Make your home a sanctuary** – a place where your children feel safe and welcomed.
2. **Make your home a place where Love resides**—where the goodness of God’s love touches your children through your love for them. The place where God first reveals himself to your children, and they learn to relate to him.
3. **Make your home a school of prayer**—where your children learn to converse with God through simple prayer rituals, and through their gradual participation in the sacramental life of their Catholic community.
4. **Make your home an apprenticeship to loving**—a place where your children learn to love by watching how you love. Following your example, they form habits that will influence their relationships for the rest of their life.
5. **Make your home a place where children learn to live in God’s time**—the place where they learn about God’s providence, and that time is a precious gift to be used to serve God. Make your home a place where your family celebrates its milestones (i.e.: birthdays, anniversaries and special events) and the liturgical seasons with a sense of gratitude toward God.
6. **Make your home a training camp for discipleship**—a way of life that teaches your children that they belong to a larger family, and that true love and faith are gifts that we are to share beyond the walls of our house.

The purpose of this book is to help parents, regardless of their circumstances, create a home environment that acknowledges God’s presence and helps the children learn habits that will help them grow as human beings and mature in faith.

Family spirituality is about learning to live in God’s presence, letting him guide us, and giving glory to him through everything we do. This is every family’s path to holiness. St. Paul writes, “Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others” (Col. 3:23).



## **A Word of Hope**

If you are among those whose experience of home-life during your formative years has left you with painful memories, perhaps this book can help you heal.

## **Who Is the Book For?**

This book is for all families, especially those with young children. It is for multigenerational families; families with two parents; families headed by a single mother or a single father; families where one parent is not Catholic, and for grandparents, especially those who are helping raise their grandchildren. God is in all of our homes. The Church is a family of families (AL 87). All families belong to it, and each family is unique and different.

Our homes are truly the cradle of the Church. The well-being of our home life today is critical to the future of the Church and of society. St. John Paul II said repeatedly, and his words have been echoed by Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, “The future of the world and of the church passes through the family” (FC 75).

What children learn in their homes during their formative years gives shape to their spiritual DNA and will remain with them for the rest of their lives. The researchers at the Institute for Family Studies reported in December 2021 in a paper titled “The Religious Marriage Paradox” that children who grow up in a home where faith is practiced have greater odds of a stable marriage and lower chances of divorce.

The chapters that follow are written in simple language with no big words or complicated ideas. Only simple truths that hopefully will resonate with you and practical suggestions to help your family members remember that God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is right by you all the time.

According to Church statistics (CARA 2015), approximately one-fourth of Catholic families (24%) today have a parent who is not Catholic. Recent data suggest that this number is increasing. When

parents are practicing two different faiths, this disparity can, at times, create difficulties in passing on the Catholic faith. This book does not address those difficulties but points to ways in which the children can benefit from their parents' religious faiths. While it is important that children be formed in the Catholic tradition, it may be beneficial for them to be exposed to the religious and spiritual practices of the non-Catholic parent. Because this book is intended to unite and not divide families, you will find across all the chapters reflection questions and conversation starters that, in most cases, can be answered by both parents.

## **How to Use This Book**

Mother and father can ideally use the book together. However, if your spouse is not interested or not able to read the book, do not be discouraged. Do it alone. You are a co-parent, and you can contribute to creating a home environment for your family that fosters growth in faith. In other words, you are co-responsible for setting the direction for your children's Christian formation. This book can also be used by groups of parents, such as those organized by a Catholic school or by a parish during the preparation for the sacraments: Baptism, First Confession, or First Communion; or by groups of parents who meet regularly. It can also be used by small groups sponsored by Lay Ecclesial Movements such as the Christian Family Movement, Teams of Our Lady, Couples for Christ, Marriage Encounter, the Cursillo Movement, Christ Renews His Parish, and other such ministries.

The pages that follow are intended to be savored, reflected upon, and discussed. Read one chapter at a time, and reflect on the questions you find throughout it. Many of these are intended for your own development. Each chapter closes with a call to action. This is your opportunity to identify small actions your family can take to improve your home environment and set the direction for your children's spiritual growth. In addition, each chapter ends with a set of "conversation starters" and suggestions to help you engage your children in thoughtful conversations that will help them grow in the

Catholic faith.

## **What This Book Is Not**

The chapters of this book reflect the spirituality of the Christian family developed in our Catholic tradition over the centuries. Therefore, what is proposed here is not a throwback to an earlier way of life that is not fitting for modern times. The content of this book is inspired by the words of St. John Paul II, “Catholic Parents must learn to form their family as a ‘domestic church,’ a church in the home as it were, where God is honored, his law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems, and sufferings of everyone else. All this is not to advocate a return to some outdated style of living: it is to return to the roots of human development and human happiness” (Homily at Aqueduct Racetrack in Brooklyn, NY, 10- 6-1995).

This book is not a set of prescriptions for Catholic families to adopt. In other words, what you will read is not prescriptive; it is descriptive. It describes the author’s and other people’s experiences of growing up in a Catholic home. Your experiences may be different from theirs. I encourage you to take from these pages what is useful to you and your family. Consider what the book is suggesting and adapt it to your own situation. I hope these pages will help you carry out the responsibilities you accepted on the day you asked the Church to baptize your children, and you promised to pass on our Catholic faith to them.

To assist you, the book contains an Appendix with a short list of traditional Catholic prayers.

**Suggestion:**

At the end of each chapter, you will find a call to action and suggestions for what you can do. I want to invite you to embrace the first call to action: a simple blessing of your home. This is a worthy prayer. Recall the words of my pastor, “We bless your houses each year to rededicate your homes and your families to God.”

Years ago, there were more priests, and it was possible for them to visit families to bless their parishioners’ homes. Today, in the United States, it is still possible to ask your pastor or deacon to come to bless your home, but their time availability is limited. If you live in a community where it is easy to schedule a home blessing with a priest or deacon, I encourage you to do so. If this is not easily done, I would encourage you to use the short home blessing on the next page. Do it with your family and explain, as my pastor did to his parishioners, that we do this ritual to dedicate our home and our family to God. We do it to remember that we are part of his family, and he lives among us. He is the guide on our family’s journey.

This home blessing is adapted from the custom known as “Chalking of the Door.” Through this simple ritual, we ask God’s blessing on those who live in the home and on all those who visit throughout the year. Make this an annual ritual for your family that you can repeat each New Year’s Day, or on the day of the Epiphany.

## Home Blessing

Gather by your home's entrance, the front door of your apartment or house. Then the head of the family or any member leads.

Let us pray!

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Lord our God,*

*come and bless this house (apartment) which is our home.*

*Surround this shelter with Your Holy Spirit.*

*Encompass all its four sides with the power of Your protection*

*so that no evil or harm will come near.*

*May the divine blessing shield this home from destruction, storm, sickness and all that might bring evil to us who shall live within these walls.*

Then, using some chalk, preferably blessed, (you can take the chalk to Mass and have it blessed by a priest or deacon) write the following on the entrance to your home: +20 CMB 23+. The numbers represent the year, in the example 2023. The letters CMB stand for "Christus Mansionem Benedicat," a Latin phrase that means "May Christ bless this dwelling." Some carry out this blessing on the occasion of the Epiphany and interpret the letters CMB to represent the names of the three kings: **C**aspar, **M**elchior and **B**althasar. After writing these numbers and letters, continue your prayer.

*Blessed be this doorway.*

*May all who come to it be treated with respect and kindness.*

*May all our comings and goings be under the seal of God's loving care.*

*Blessed be all the rooms of this home.*

*May each of them be holy and filled with the spirit of happiness.*

*May no dark powers ever be given shelter within any of these rooms but banished as soon as recognized.*

*Let us pray as our Lord taught us to pray: (Recite together the Our Father...)*

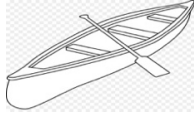
*May God's holy blessing rest upon us all,*

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The prayer is adapted from Prayers for the Domestic Church by Edward Hays. Copyright 2007 by Ave Maria Press, P.O. Box 428, Notre Dame, IN 46556. Used with permission of publisher.

## Track Your Family's Journey

Your family is on a journey. Use this book to guide your household on the chosen path, and track your progress by documenting the actions you decide to take after reading each chapter.



### 1. Home Is Our Sanctuary

ACTION:

### 2. Home Is Where Love Resides

ACTION:

### 3. Home Is a School of Prayer

ACTION:

### 4. Home Is an Apprenticeship to Loving

ACTION:

### 5. Home Is Where We Learn to Live in God's Time

ACTION:

### 6. Home Is a Training Camp for Discipleship

ACTION: