



## Marriage and family life: Ground Zero for the present and future of our Church.

By Dr. Tom Neal, Ph.D.

### Ground Zero.

- o The point just above or below the detonation of an explosive
- o A starting point or base for some activity.

If Dostoyevsky is right, that beauty will save the world, then it is the beauty of **familial** love, sacrificial, life-giving, serving, forgiving, reconciling, faithful, fruitful, generative of a culture of peace and a civilization of justice ESPECIALLY in the darkest places of creation....which is where the God of Jesus is most present, along with His Body, us, the Church.

Yes, the church was called and formed by God, at Pentecost's own fiery and life-giving ground zero, to be sent, to be thrust out into the ruins of the world to unleash God's rescue and repair work in Jesus; to consecrate that world to His Kingdom of truth and goodness, grace and love, mercy and peace, justice and joy.

This is what Vatican Council II calls the "**secular genius**" of the laity's mission, joining the God who so-loved the secular world that He sent His Son to rescue it, and make it a new creation – a fitting home for God to dwell with us.

As with so many people in this age, my own family of origin was a place of grace living amid the broken shards of divorce and family alienation.

I am grateful for Pope Francis' image of church as love frantically at work dragging the battle-weary and fallen into the Field Hospital, to have their wounds tended by the Good Samaritan God; and then realize they have become the **wounded healers** sent back out into the battlefields of this world.

- Out of my experience of a broken home when I was in my early teens
- Finding my place in my father's second marriage and family
- Navigating a religiously divided home, Orthodox-Catholic
- Out of all that, with its many stories and pains, countless unexpected graces flowed.
- My half-brother, Mikey, has Autism and Down Syndrome. He was no longer an infant when his parents decided it was time for his baptism. I was prepared for the unexpected because I was pretty sure Mikey would not like water being poured over his head.
- As Fr. Stephen poured the water and said the most special words, "I baptize you....", Mikey, who rarely said anything I could understand said very clearly: "I love you."
- Fr. Stephan then said, after everyone stopped crying, "I am supposed to preach now! What can I say? Mikey has said everything! This is why we exist, to speak those three words with our life. God chose this helpless child, to speak to us today. For to such a child belongs the Kingdom, and those of us who are ready to follow Mickey's lead, we hope we too will gain entry. But if you do

not wish to live this way, then stay far from this Font and do not eat at this Table (pointing to the Altar).”

- Fr. Stephen spoke those words to our family. He knew our family history well. So simple, so hard. Love after the pattern God has revealed to us in Jesus on the Cross, bleeding, dying, gasping for breath, all the while praying, forgiving, loving, caring for others’ well-being before and above His own.

Love is the whole point, the beginning and end, the vocation and mission, the purpose of everything God has lavished on the Church – her sacraments and creeds, her Bible and Catechism, her hierarchy and churches, her saints and mystics, her ministries and witness – all of these ecclesial realities should stun an unbelieving world into saying: “SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER! Nothing has been seen like it on the face of the earth!”

And it is Marriage, family that are the **ground zero** of this mission, where love appears in its most concentrated and extreme form. Love of neighbor in its most extreme form, where the Gospel counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience are lived radically. Indeed, I would say that monastic life was raised up by God in the early centuries of Christianity to remind the family of its call to live a life of radical community in love, selflessness, unity, prayer, service, hospitality, and so on.

This all reminds me of a story St. Jerome recounted in the early 4th century in his commentary on Galatians: The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, "Little children, love one another." The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard these same words, finally said, "Teacher, why do you always say this?" He replied with a line worthy of John, "Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient."

### **What is our first vocation in life? To be a saint.**

What is a saint? Last week a first grader sage gave this answer: Someone in heaven!

My response was: Yes! Excellent! But even more, I would say: a saint is someone who IS heaven, is heaven on earth; who lives on earth as it is in heaven.

I frequently hear this beautiful phrase: Marriage is about getting each other to heaven. OF COURSE!

My qualifier would be: YES! But first, before your departure to heaven, marriage is about getting heaven to earth, earth to heaven.

Marriage is about realizing Jesus’ refrain in His public ministry: The Kingdom of heaven is at hand! WHERE!?!?

In our marriage, in our family.

Karl Marx leveled a stinging accusation against Christians of his day: “You’re all so heavenly minded that you’re of no earthly good.”

In other words, when we think about our life of faith as an **escape plan** for *getting out of earth and into heaven* rather than as a **rescue plan** for *uniting heaven and earth*, we risk reinforcing heaven’s

irrelevance to earth, deepening the modern divide between God and the world, faith and life, sacred and secular, religion and everything else.

Okay – so what is heaven? [How would you explain it to another person right now?]

Heaven is where God's will is done, completely, perfectly, fully.

So, what is earth? Earth is where God's will is to be done, by our acceptance of God's will, our obedience, our free YES, given every day in the words Jesus taught us: "thy will be done".

And what is God's will? 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "It is God's will that you grow in holiness."

Holiness! [we are running in circles here, aren't we!?!]

### **And what is holiness? Well, in a word, it's love. "The perfection of charity," the Church says. But not just any kind of love!**

Holiness is the capacity to love as God loves; AND to love with God's very love that He poured into our hearts through the Spirit.

For the Jews the meaning of LOVE is clarified by the Commandments. You love God? Keep the first 3 commandments! You love your neighbor? Keep the last 7 commandments!

For Christians, it gets even more specific; and slightly terrifying. To love the holiness way is to love in the spirit of the beatitudes; with the same love with which God loved us in Jesus, and especially in Him crucified.

Mother Teresa once defined a saint brilliantly: "one in whose presence it's easy to believe in God" – in the God who was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; who suffered died and was buried; descended into hell and on the third day rose again, ascended into heaven and will come again to judge all history by the standard of – LOVE.

Saints make God's heaven present now, here, wedding it to earth – not primarily by being pious, or by doing churchy things; or by performing miracles or smelling like roses or having the stigmata.

Saints make heaven present especially by loving when the going gets tough; loving the people your stuck with; loving when we butt up against pain, failure, tragedy, sin, evil. Because it is THEN that love is transformed into its highest form, its supreme form, its most Godlike form. Which is?

**MERCY**.... that is: Love encountering pain, failure, tragedy, sin, evil – and overcoming it, healing it.

And marriages, families provide ample, massive, vast and endless opportunities for bringing evil and love together, face to face, and bathing evil in God's gushing mercy – gushing, that is, from His open, pierced side that is the source of our entire Christian life.

So...marriage and family life were created not so much to "get" spouses and children "to heaven," but to allow for a community like God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), within which love can be made, mercy can be done – to the extreme – a sanctuary where heaven can finally claim a portion of earth as its own; can claim our homes for the new creation God is preparing for those who love...

Marriage and family are a supreme school of love, of virtue, of what it looks like when the image of the Trinity breaks into a broken world, and heals it.

Remember my half-brother Mikey....now in his thirties. Mikey has chronic insomnia that may last through 3 nights 1 to 2 times a month. He cannot be left alone during those nights because he is terrified of the dark. His mom, Bea, has been the one who makes herself available to be with Mikey during those sleepless nights. Bea has never complained all those years, but she has asked for prayers.

I complimented her once on her heroism in face of Mikey's insomnia – she dislikes compliments, so deflects them – and she simply said: “No! Mikey's the champ. He is the one who suffers most.... I tell your Dad, if I ever get to heaven, it will be because of Mikey. Mikey taught me to love. He showed me just how selfish I really was, and pulled me out of myself. And isn't that the whole point?”

My God. Hers is the best definition of salvation I have ever heard: To be saved is not a get-out-of-jail-free card; but to be made capable of loving like God in Jesus on the cross.

To be saved is to **discover your vocation** in every other human being around you who pulls you out of yourself.

**My vocation?** My neighbor, the person next to me, near to me who makes a claim on me ... Rejecting the mark of Cain and claiming the mark of Baptism, we say: “I am my brother's, my sister's keeper.”

My father once said: “You don't ‘become’ a father, your children rip fatherhood out of you!”

Same can be said of every relationship in marriage and family.

And as Dorothy Day said with such terrible simplicity: “We only love God as much as we love those we like the least.”

God in Jesus came to rescue us from a loveless world for a world of love.

Marriage is the most extreme form of neighbor love, in which you pledge to your spouse the free gift of ALL your heart, soul, mind and strength after the pattern of Christ's love for the Church

Marriage “sets the model” for love in the family, in the neighborhood, the city, the nation, the world, the church

- Marriage has the power to “consecrate” earth to heaven, for heaven.
- As marriage goes, so the family; as the family goes, so goes civilization; and so goes the church.
- Marriage even sets the model for God's love for us, which is why God takes it so seriously that He made of it a Sacrament of His love.

What an immense weight resting on the shoulders of every marriage and family!

- Not the burden of having to be the perfect family, but allowing itself to be ground zero of God's plan to rescue us from the ruins of sin and death.

It's no mistake that the words at Mass that consecrate the bread and wine into the risen Jesus, are the **most concentrated words of love and mercy ever spoken:**

- Take and eat, this is my Body, broken for you.
- Take and drink, this is my Blood, spilled for you.

When our love approximates in any way the paschal mystery, the cross, we call down heaven to earth; poke holes in heaven, AND our life consecrates the world to God, wedding heaven and earth, God and man. **LOVE MAKES US HOLY.**

And all that we gather throughout the week, we carry to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and, in the Offertory, offer it to God for a final act of Consecration

And our consecrating God receives all of our offerings into His Kingdom as a Treasure

And out of that Treasure He builds a new heavens and new earth. Because the new creation is made of love – His love, our love.

### **Let me try to sum this all up, by emphasizing the uniqueness of the laity's call.**

Above all in and through marriage and family life, the call is to become not just saints – but **secular saints**; saints sent into the secular world as salt, light and leaven, spreading everywhere the culture of heaven on earth.

According to Vatican II and every Pope since the Council, the **primary, central, core vocation and mission of the laity** in the church is to be a saint.

And for the laity, sanctity is **not** to be had by work in and for the church, or even to do churchy things (technical term)

The primary vocation of the laity is to **sanctify the secular world and consecrate it to God,**

- by means of the ordinary circumstances of marriage and family life;
- by means of excellence in secular professions;
- by means of political, civic and cultural participation;
- by means of ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation in promoting peace
- by means of the works of mercy
- by means of a daily witness of a life filled with faith, hope and love;
- by means of bearing the hardships of life in faith and trust
- And all of this, gathered up and offered by lay men, women and children--offered above all in the holy sacrifice of the Mass to God – saves the world and makes saints.
- These canonized saints will be married, single, single parents, divorced, annulled and remarried, widows and widowers, fathers and mothers, childless couples, lawyers, stockbrokers, janitors, fashion designers, actors, business men and women, doctors, maids, school teachers, janitors, principals, bankers, musicians, factory workers, gunnery sergeants, librarians, machine shop workers, architects, prison guards, manual laborers, accountants, nurses, CEO's, physicists, counselors, police officers, mechanics, electricians, engineers, secretaries, carpet cleaners, the disabled, homebound elderly or bartenders who strive to love God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength by loving their neighbor as themselves — especially the poor — quietly,

consistently, imperfectly yet heroically. I list these intentionally because, over the 30 years I have actually been noticing, I have spotted people whom I have experienced as saints in every category listed — and many more.

### **This is an unexploded bomb of Vatican Council II; I am here to pull the pin.**

- **“The hour of the laity has struck”** (John Paul II - Nov. 26, 2000, Jubilee of the Apostolate of the Laity) – something distinctively new, fresh has come into being as the Spirit continues to lead the Church into all Truth.
- As John Paul II envisioned it, the Church in the third millennium will discover afresh what has, of course, been quietly present all along:
- Canonized holiness in the midst of the world;
- Sanctity in ordinary marriage and family life;
- Sanctity in those dedicated to the vast arena of secular professions; sanctity in those whom I will call here, **“secular saints”** – who, to use the words of Vatican Council II, “are tightly bound up in all types of secular affairs, ***called there by God to sanctify the world from within***, as leaven.”
- These saints ***will not have withdrawn from the world*** in order to consecrate their lives to God in holiness of life. **Catholics need to be the best secularists around and not leave the worldly world to the atheists while we remain in church.**
- They will be ***those who sought holiness immersed in the world***, like leaven-salt-light, in order to consecrate that world to God.
- These **secular saints**, Pope Pius XII once said (long before Pope Francis), “are the church on the front lines,”
- Transforming the world not from the outside-in, shouting from some high pulpit or safe foxhole
- But from the inside crying out; BEHIND enemy lines—**loving the enemies,**
- **Living** out the faith every day, **filling** the ordinary with the extraordinary; and **showing** the world what doing the world God’s way looks like.

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