



SHOULD FAITH JUST BE PRIVATE?

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Culture in the broadest sense can be defined as a way of life. The great historian [Christopher Dawson](#) created an entire corpus focused on the intersection of religion and culture. [He claimed](#) that four central pillars form the foundation of culture: people, environment, work, and thought. [He describes](#) how “the formation of culture is due to the interaction of all these factors; it is a four-fold community—for it involves in varying degrees a community of work and a community of thought as well as a community of place and a community of blood.”

When Dawson refers to the importance of thought, he means especially religious thought, which provides the inner form for the material organization of society. He describes how “every social culture is at once a material way of life and a spiritual order,” because “it is the religious impulse which supplies the cohesive force which unifies a society and a culture.”

Although Dawson recognizes that we live in the first secular culture in human history, he also rightly claims that the modern world has its own spiritual ideas, or pseudo-religions, that guide how we organize the material world: ideas of inevitable social progress, extreme individual liberty, the primacy of material prosperity, and the dominance of empirical science. These ideas have created a spiritual imbalance, which made [Dawson aware](#) that “the real evil lies deeper—in the breach that has taken place between the technical development of our civilization and its spiritual life.”

Dawson not only recognizes the problem, but also offers a solution: “The recovery of our civilization is therefore above all a question of restoring the balance between its inner and outer life. The unlimited material expansion of our civilization has weakened it by making it superficial, and the time has come for a movement in the reverse direction—a movement of concentration to recover its inner strength and unity.”

Our culture has displaced faith from its central role, relegating it to the private sphere. Dawson recognizes that this has created a deep spiritual crisis within the individual, with material needs satisfied in abundance, but deeper, spiritual ones neglected. Christians play into this crisis by accepting the divide between the interior and exterior elements of life - communicating only spiritual ideas, while leaving them divorced from their social and cultural context.

The crisis can be resolved by placing religion back at the [heart of culture](#), for “it is only through the medium of culture that the Faith can penetrate civilization and transform the thought and ideology of

modern culture." And he continues: "A Christian culture is a culture which is oriented to supernatural ends and spiritual reality, just as a secularized culture is one which is oriented to material reality and to the satisfaction of man's material needs." And for Dawson, only the faith is strong enough to penetrate and transform the depth of the crisis facing the West.

The Church has increasingly recognized the importance of culture and has given it a central role within her efforts of evangelization. The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* provides the Church's first extended treatment of culture, stating that "man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture" (§53).

Ten years later in 1975, Paul VI emphasized the importance of culture for evangelization in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, teaching that "the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time . . . Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel" (§20).

John Paul II strengthened this focus on culture by stating that "creating a new culture of love and of hope inspired by the truth that frees us in Christ Jesus . . . is the priority for the new evangelization." He explains this priority further in *Christifidelis Laici*: "Therefore, I have maintained that a faith that does not affect a person's culture is a faith 'not fully embraced, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived'" (§59). Faith must be lived out as a way of life and cannot remain simply an interior belief; it must shape and guide all that we do.

Building upon these insights from Dawson and the directives of the Magisterium, I propose to address how our efforts at rebuilding a Christian culture should begin with the family. First, I will look generally at how family life relates to culture and culture and then propose four points to give direction for our catechetical efforts to help families live the faith as a way of life.

Culture, Catechesis, And The Family

Building upon the principle that the family forms the foundation of society, Pope John Paul II stated prophetically: "The future humanity passes by way of the family." In light of the deep crisis we face in family life, it is imperative that we increase our efforts to support the family. Pope Benedict XVI

emphasized that “the evangelization of the family is a pastoral priority.” When faith enters the family, it naturally forms culture, for “Christianity is a creator of culture in its very foundation.”

He also said in an address to the members of the Roman clergy on March 2, 2006: “Only faith in Christ and only sharing the faith of the Church saves the family; and on the other hand, only if the family is saved can the Church also survive. For the time being, I do not have an effective recipe for this, but it seems to me that we should always bear it in mind.” We have to help come up with this recipe. Catechesis plays an important role in forming the members of the family in faith, but it must also assist them to connect their faith to life as a whole.

Catechesis aims at deepening one's faith: *The General Directory for Catechesis* (1998) states: “Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways” (§105).

In relation to the family, its goal should be to strengthen the belief and practice of the faith in its domestic life. Family catechesis constitutes an urgent task, for as Pope Benedict affirmed, “only if the family is saved can the Church also survive . . . We must therefore do all that favors the family: family circles, family catechesis, and we must teach prayer in the family.”

With this focus, catechesis forms habits of faith. Family catechesis requires that families receive the message of evangelization and the content of catechesis, but the effort to form family culture through catechesis looks to the next step of how to apply and live that message or content. The goal of family ministry cannot focus on content alone, but should look to the incarnation or inculturation of faith in daily life, translating patterns of belief into a hostile surrounding culture.

In *Catechesi Tradendae*, §20, John Paul speaks of “the specific aim of catechesis,” which is to enact change in how one thinks and lives. He describes this aim as the development of faith, “which he explains is “a matter of giving growth, at the level of knowledge and in life, to the seed of faith sown by the Holy Spirit with the initial proclamation and effectively transmitted by Baptism. Catechesis aims therefore at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God's word, so that the whole of a person's humanity is impregnated by that word. Changed by the working of grace into a new creature, the Christian thus sets himself to follow Christ and learns more and more within the Church to think like Him, to judge like Him, to act in conformity with His commandments, and to hope as He invites us to.”

This catechetical approach points to the family as the means for translating faith into the concrete expressions of daily life. The General Directory of Catechesis makes clear that “the care of the family always remains central, since it is the primary agent of an incarnate transmission of the faith” (§207). Faith meets culture primarily within the family. John Paul taught that “God's plan for marriage and the family touches men and women in the concreteness of their daily existence in specific social and cultural situations.” The family constitutes the domestic church, where the faith of the parish and school meets the outside world, where the work of inculturation happens (or does not happen) in one's life.

The family should be recognized as a cultural unit and producer of culture. John Paul proposed that “it is necessary to demand a healthy primacy of the family in the overall work of educating man to real humanity,” because it is the “fundamental creative environment of culture.” The basic cultural task of the family is to transmit culture by initiating children into a way of life. “The family transmits [cultural heritage](#). It is in the bosom of the family that culture is passed on ‘as a specific way of man's ‘existing’ and ‘being.’” We all enter into a specific way of life through our family.

Creating a Christian culture [occurs simply](#) “when the truths of the Faith are applied by the laity in their daily lives.” The Catechism speaks of “creating a home,” where children receive an “education in the virtues,” learn how to “subordinate ‘the material and instinctual dimensions to interior and spiritual ones,’” are shown a “good example” or witness of the Christian life, and receive discipline (§2223). The home is a locus of Christian culture, as it should embody the spiritual realities of the faith concretely in the many small ways of interaction, instruction, rejoicing, and even correction. The home should be a sacrament of the Church's broader life.

We generally design catechesis narrowly in relation to sacramental preparation for children or adult faith formation. These tasks flow from the mission of the parish, but as parents are the primary educators of the faith (See: [Gravissimum Educationis](#) §3), catechesis for the family should assist the family in recognizing and fulfilling its distinct, catechetical role.

In his [Letter to Families](#), John Paul situates religious education within the domestic church, stating that this role should “make the family a true subject of evangelization and the apostolate within the Church.” Catechesis makes the family the subject not just the object of imparting the faith, enabling the family to fulfill its own unique ministry. This mission “builds up the Kingdom of God in history through the everyday realities that concern and distinguish its state of life,” creating conditions which “foster . . . a living faith and remain a support for it throughout one's life.” This makes clear that the role of religious

education does not consist in a function, but in the creation of a family environment that conduces to faith. The creation of a culture, that is, a way of life, in which faith can grow organically in the fertile soil of family life.

Forming Culture In The Family

The constituent elements of family culture relate to the four general pillars proposed by Dawson. First, its foundation consists in a particular bond between people, particularly the members of the family but also the broader community. Second, the locus of culture or the family's environment, found primarily in the home, but also the parish and places of work. Third, the function or mission of the family, its work and social life, which includes education. Finally, we have Dawson's notion of thought, which includes the religious beliefs and practices of the family.

Pope Francis, in his long series of Wednesday audiences on the family, stretching from December 2014 to September 2015, affirms these key elements that form the rhythm of the family's way of life: "[celebration, work, prayer](#)." In addition, in this same group of audiences, he addresses the topics of education, evangelization and community. These six topics provide the central themes for a catechetical revitalization of family. I will address them as follows: Prayer and celebration first; then education through the lens of imagination; followed by work; and finally, community. All of these themes relate to the overarching goal of the evangelization and catechesis of the family.

Prayer As A Way Of Life

Just as religion stands at the heart of culture, so faith should provide the center of the family's way of life. There can be no Christian culture unless a supernatural, grace-filled, relationship with God animates the life of the family. The supernatural life comes to us from the sacraments, which we receive in the parish. It from the domestic church, however, that we enter parish life and we live out the sacramental life within the home. As Pope Benedict noted: "The family . . . is the fundamental school of Christian formation on the supernatural level."

The family will become a school of the Christian life primarily through prayer. Prayer is the font of Christian culture. If this is true, then the first and most significant priority of our catechetical efforts consists in teaching families how to pray. Prayer should set the rhythm of life in a fundamental way, as

we “redeem the time” (Ephesians 5:16) or as Pope Francis said, give “[time back to God](#).” The liturgy shapes time by creating a rhythm for the day, by praying in the morning and evening, for the week, by keeping the Lord’s day, and for the year, by celebrating the seasons and feasts of the Church. The supernatural life of the family springs from its “worship in church . . . and as its prolongation in the home” through family prayer.

Ordering the life of the family through prayer constitutes no small task. The domestic church may find inspiration from the monastery, with its daily rhythm of prayer and work within the stability of the [monastic family](#): “Just as the monastery’s life is ordered toward God, so must the family home be.” Ordering life through prayer must be taught, and in this endeavor another religious community, the [Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia](#), provides helpful advice: “Please remember that merely saying the prayers is not the goal. The goal is praying: personally encountering the Lord, listening to Him, and giving Him your heart.” We may be tempted to focus simply on outward rituals with children, but the heart of the family community, like the religious life, is a search for God (quaerere Deum), meeting God in silent prayer.

Interior silence, though, progresses to outward celebration, arising naturally from the festivity built into the Catholic cycle of the liturgy. [Sofia Cavaletti](#) speaks of “celebration [as] a universal expression; it is not restricted to the religious world. Rather, it corresponds to the need of human beings to periodically experience basic realities of daily life in a particularly intense and focused way.” She says further that liturgical celebrations help us to live our biblical history: “Liturgical celebration is an essential instrument in rendering past events concrete and powerful in the lives of believers.”

The liturgical seasons provide opportunities to celebrate God’s goodness and the blessings he has bestowed upon the family. Echoing the thought of [Josef Pieper](#), Pope Francis describe the [nature of this affirmation](#): “Celebration is first and foremost a loving and grateful look at work well done . . . It’s time to look at our home, our friends we host, the community that surrounds us, and to think: what a good thing! God did this when he created the world. And he does so again and again, because God is always creating, even at this moment!” Pieper [also affirms](#) that “to celebrate a festival means: to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole.”

Sunday is a moment each week to stop and to make this affirmation with rest and the enjoyment of family life.

Enlivening The Imagination

Although it may not be obvious, focusing on the imagination relates to prayer. Prayer builds upon our experience of reality, as the soil from which it draws life. [Msgr. Timothy Verdun](#) describes how the family cultivates the foundation for prayer by imparting language and by stimulating the mind through experience: "There is in fact an art of prayer that can be transmitted from masters to disciples as from parents to children. The places designated for its transmission are indeed, first, the family, where children initially learn words and gestures with which to enter into relation with God, and then the community of other believers." He continues, speaking of the *lex orandi, lex credendi*, as "a rule in the service of creativity, for faith and prayer in effect are creative responses." In the "long history of the Church, the 'art of prayer'—the system of words and gestures with which believers turn to God—in fact has often been transmitted through the visual arts and architecture."

What does this mean concretely for the family? The family's mission of education must compensate for the poverty of schooling today and overcome obstacles, such as technology, which impede the development of the imagination. I think of the immense importance [Pope Benedict XVI ascribed](#) to listening to Mozart as a family when he was young: "You might say that there Mozart thoroughly penetrated our souls, and his music still touches me very deeply, because it is so luminous and yet at the same time so deep."

Contrast this experience with the normal child today, deprived of beauty and immersed in distraction. The basic education parents can give their children, essential for any schooling, career, and even prayer, should focus on learning to listen (no small task today), to understand, and to communicate. We can no longer take these foundational points for granted. In terms of the imagination, we have to teach children how to see, to appreciate, and to discern the worth of things.

Pope Benedict [reflects on the need](#) for "the formation of children to respond appropriately to the media . . . Within this framework, training in the proper use of the media is essential for the cultural, moral and spiritual development of children." Interestingly, he continues by insisting that we introduce our children "to what is aesthetically and morally excellent," such as "children's classics in literature, to the fine arts and to uplifting music."

Without this formation in beauty, in a cultural patrimony, we experience a [breakdown in identity](#): "The crisis of a society begins when it no longer knows how to hand down its cultural patrimony and its

fundamental values to the new generations."

Catechetically speaking, we have to impart a Catholic identity through the imagination, so that the family's way of thinking and values reflect the Gospel. [Cardinal Francis Arinze](#) challenges us to consider the effectiveness our catechesis in this regard: "The Church in every country can ask herself what image of the Gospel is present in the mass media and in cultural thought patterns in the country in question . . . How much are they contributing to cultural patterns in their society? . . . What are the laity contributing to the fabric of society so that life in society will be as near as possible to the Gospel ideal?" We cannot bring the Gospel to the world, if it has not penetrated our own minds and habits.

Family Work

Unlike immersion in the digital world, we form imagination most profoundly through a direct experience of reality. This experience in turn draws us naturally to work, our creative encounter with the physical world. Many thinkers have described the crisis of the family in modern culture as arising in large part due to a lack of common work, common purposes that hold family members together.

This element of family formation consists literally in helping families to form culture, that is, to learn to make things, to shape their home environment, and to become co-creators with God. John Paul [exhorts us](#): "family, become what you are" and the Church needs to help families achieve this even in a natural sense.

John Paul describes what he [means by this phrase](#): "Accordingly, the family must go back to the "beginning" of God's creative act, if it is to attain self-knowledge and self-realization in accordance with the inner truth not only of what it is but also of what it does in history." Pope Francis [describes](#) this looking back to the beginning for families as well: ""The family that responds to the call of Jesus consigns the stewardship of the world back to the covenant of man and woman with God. Let us imagine that the helm of history is entrusted entrusted—finally!—to the covenant of man and woman. . . . The themes of earth and home, of the economy and work, would sing a very different tune."

Pope Francis [affirms](#) that work must be taught in the family for the "family is a great workbench." Teaching work is not drudgery, but emphasizes the need for creative expression in the formation of Christian culture. [David Clayton](#) notes that we have been "good at forming consumers of Catholic

culture, but not good at forming creators." We need to learn "the practice of beauty-in-the-making. We are incarnational and learn by imitation and doing, and ultimately, as this progresses, by the creation of new works." Teaching work as a cultural expression elicits the creative potential of each child. Clayton continues: "Each of us is called to be creative in a special way and to contribute to the culture. Our formation also, therefore, ought to involve a process of discovery of personal vocation."

Work is also good for the family, drawing the members of the family together in a common effort, rather than allowing work and school to isolate members of the family in their own individual activities.

[James Stenson](#), in his essay "On Fatherhood," looks back to past home dynamics: "The home was a place of social and intellectual activity; people talked, read, played, worked, and prayed together." Now, however, "the home itself has become a place of play rather than work," even to the point that for our children, "life is play."

Stenson also [gives a description](#) of how fathers should teach their children about hard work and the right use of material things: "Successful fathers . . . work alongside their children at home, teaching the relationship between effort and results, along with the satisfaction of personal accomplishment. They are sparing in allowances. They make the children wait for things, and if possible, earn them. They give generously of time and money to the needy, and they encourage (but don't force) the children to do the same. They don't fill the home with expensive gadgets and amusements. They budget and save for the future, and thus teach the children an important lesson: Money is an instrument, a resource for the service of our loved ones and those in need. And that's all it is."

Work is a key element of culture and families will have to rediscover its value as something that gives life and creativity to the home. Catechesis does not teach this work in itself, but rather helps families to understand the role of work in human development and its importance for family life and culture.

Forming Intentional Family Community

Families must overcome what has become a key characteristic of modern culture, isolation. The restoration of culture will not occur as long as this isolation remains, especially within families. The culture they form does not exist for themselves alone, but for the world more broadly. Families also need support for their efforts, as children see the values of the family reinforced by other adults and

peers.

Pope Francis has [urged us](#) to recognize that "strengthening the bond between the family and the Christian community today is indispensable and urgent."

Providing an example, [Rod Dreher](#) quotes [Marco Sermarini](#), the founder of a community of families, the [Tipi Loschi](#) in Italy: "It's becoming clear, Sermarini says, that Christian families have to start linking themselves decisively with other families. 'If we don't move in this direction, we will face more and more crises.'"

The mission of culture-building necessarily includes community, as culture itself, as a common way of life, unites people to accomplish a common vision. Therefore, "[true Christian communities and culture at large](#), then, arise from the association of Catholic families that take it upon themselves to enculturate the Faith."

Dilsaver continues: "For the formation of communities is but the extension of the formation of families." Pope Francis [also emphasized](#) that the building of community by the family should have a broader impact: "The family and the parish must work the miracle of a more communal life for the whole of society."

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, Ireland [has taken this principle farther](#), in looking at the future of parish life: "The parishes of tomorrow will be "communities of intentional disciples" sustained by committed and formed lay people. The key to this will be the formation of cells, or smaller gatherings of committed people who meet and pray and develop together their understanding of faith, and who find there the courage to engage in mission and outreach."

The family must counteract the individuality that fragments modern culture, reversing "the community [desertification](#) of the modern city." Intentional and committed fellowships of families will recreate a sense of belonging, stability, and support so lacking in our parishes and families today. John Paul [has called](#) for a "special solidarity among families" and an "apostolate of families to one another." The more families embrace their mission to form culture in the home, the more this culture will spread to other families throughout the Church and society.

Families also have a gift to offer others in opening their homes for this fellowship and to those especially without a sense of belonging. *Familiaris Consortio* notes that we should recognize an “ever greater importance in our society of hospitality in all its forms”

Hospitality indicates that a family does not simply exist for its self, but to serve by opening the life of the family to others. This points to a mission the family exercises in sharing the culture it forms without even leaving the home. Christian culture overcomes isolation in that it exists not for its own sake, but as a service for the good of humanity.

We should focus our catechetical efforts on helping families to live their Catholic faith, both within the home and in conjunction with other families. I call this effort the creation of an “open source movement.” It is a “movement” in that it encourages particular, spiritual practices. It is “open source” in that it inspires families with a vision, assisting them to form the culture with, in, and through the parish. This approach makes the family central, relying on their own initiative, rather than on an office or program (although they will need inspiration to begin this process). This entails a movement from the family as object to the family as subject of catechesis.

The final consideration, and one that requires further elaboration, consists in how to bring about this new approach to family catechesis. We have relied traditionally on classroom settings to impart the content of faith. This will need to continue, but the task of forming culture focuses rather on establishing practices and habits to change family life. Therefore, it is necessary to model Christian culture to families. This can be done through retreats, small group mentorship, and parish missions. Any such event must include the formation of relationships and family communities so that families receive support in following through with their new practices.

John Paul affirmed that faith requires culture to be true to itself and complete (see, *Christifidelis Laici*, §59). Families need Christian culture to be faithful to their mission to live and communicate their faith in the modern world. In light of the general crisis of culture, catechesis cannot remain focused solely on imparting the content of faith, but must embrace the work of rebuilding Christian culture.

Families, as the foundation of society, are the ideal place to begin this slow, but necessary, work. Family catechesis ordered toward imparting a Christian way of life provides our best opportunity to begin the renewal of public Catholic culture.

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The [image](#) shows, "A Girl Praying," by Roberto Ferruzzi (1853-1934).

