

Catechetical Sunday Message - 29th January 2023

Theme: Renewing the Church with Families of Faith (1 Cor.16:13-14)

St. Paul's farewell message to the household of Stephanas, one of the first active families of the early Church, must be the foundational factors of renewal for modern families: "*Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.*" (1 Cor. 16:13-14). The household of Stephanas exemplified the principle of doing all things in love because they devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints (1 Cor. 16:15).

Perhaps, it is through the principle of the "ministry of saints" that we can revive our families again. The "ministry of saints" exemplifies biblical love, where one seeks the best for the one being ministered to, that is, for the other. Just as the family of Stephanas did. Filled with the Spirit of God, they submitted to the leadership of the church of Corinth (Eph. 5:18-21), worked together and took on difficult tasks in their ministry for the Lord. Besides pouring their lives into serving the church, Stephanas and his family also prayed together – "The family that prays together - stays together".

Surely, there can be no better basic organism of a society than a family which is founded on the belief in God. However, the pressures, challenges, and realities facing modern families today make it difficult for families to intentionally grow in faith together. Societal and cultural trends point toward individualism, atheism, pluralism, personal choice, and instant gratification, all of which challenge the Christian family these days.

Our religious education programs are packed with youngsters preparing to receive their First Holy Communion but then the enrolment often drops dramatically in the ensuing years. Why don't they come back? After preparing for and receiving Confirmation, many good-hearted young people move on to other things. Why do so few remain in the Church or are regularly involved in service projects or youth groups?

Perhaps with our catechism classes, faith formation programs, youth programs, Bible camps, retreats and rallies for youth and many other well-meaning programs, we may have, unfortunately, communicated to families, and especially to parents, that the best thing they can do for their children and teenagers is to "drop them off" at church, and we will make disciples out of them.

But our disciple-making efforts seemed to have yielded less positive results than we had hoped for, and so we conclude that families and parents are not doing their part. We remind them over and over again that they are the primary educators of their children's faith. Yet, why don't they behave as such? Have they got their priorities mixed-up? Or could it be that we have conditioned them to "behave" in this way?

It's long overdue. We must raise the bar in our commitment to challenge and support all families in their faith-building efforts. We must raise the bar in terms of our expectations for families and households to make a stronger commitment to explore faith at home. We need to shift the paradigm of household faith-growth from something viewed as optional and hoped-for to something that is expected; from extraordinary to ordinary.

Ultimately, renewal in the Church is the work of God. However, He works through us. The privilege and the challenge belong to us. We need to be watchful, stand firm in faith, be courageous, be strong, (cf. 1 Cor 16:13-14) and uphold faith, hope and charity- the foundational rocks on which human love in families are built upon.

Finally, "Renewing the Church with Families of Faith" can only be realised if the definitive aim of catechesis be actualised by putting "people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Spirit" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 5).