

*Journeying Together:
Theological Foundations for Pastoral Planning*

The Church as the Family of God

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The Church is a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men and women who are called to bring the joy of the Gospel to the whole world. One scriptural image used by the Second Vatican Council which may be helpful for understanding the forthcoming parish groupings and the Beacons of Light process is that of the Church as the Family of God – “the house of God in which His family dwells; the household of God in the Spirit” (cf. Eph. 2:19, 22).

The image of the Church as a family is ancient, and the idea of a family as a “domestic church” has re-emerged in recent times. Parishes are communities of families, gathered under a pastor, a “father” of the family, in communion with the bishop, to worship God and to build the Kingdom. The family is a place of belonging, a privileged place to experience love and growth, an original sign of Christ’s love for His Church, given to us by God the Father. It is both a building block of society and a critical means by which we are introduced into a decisive relationship with God.

The family exists to generate life and deepen the companionship between believers as they journey toward their common destiny. Family stability is critical for the future. This is true not only of our individual families, but also of our parish families. Every family, including a parish family, has a mission to build up the Church and increase the Kingdom of God in the world; to be a community of love in which people experience a sense of belonging; and, to be a beacon of light and hope to others.

In the Family of God we continually meet and encounter Christ who, according to Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus caritas est*, “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” In our personal families, we learn to confront difficulties and face the realities of life, enlightened by His Presence. In family life, we encounter Christ in each other. In both our individual families and parish families, our companionship comes together in a space, in our daily living and working together, on a common journey with a common goal: our destiny with God.

The Church can be understood as the Family of God. Jesus addresses God as Father and the early Church addressed its members as *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters). The Church is not principally an administrative grouping, organized and occasionally re-organized like a company; rather, its distinctive characteristics are prayer and the Eucharist. Believers are called by name to be part of this family and are drawn together and constituted as a family by the Holy Spirit. No family is perfect, and there are always members of the family with different temperaments, but there is one fundamental bond: faith.

The Church, constituted by God, is mandated to evangelize. Every family and every parish must have a missionary outlook. We must radiate Christ to the world, and yet, we are experiencing profound change, which makes the task of evangelizing more challenging. Pope Francis frequently says, “we live not so much in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch.” Acknowledging this and

the current reality of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, which includes demographic shifts and fewer priests, it is essential to adapt to effectively carry out the Church's mission in a changed environment.

Beacons of Light is not principally about a priest shortage; it is about the mission of evangelization. At the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis described his dream for the Church in *The Joy of the Gospel*: "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation."

I invite you to dream about how our parishes can be evangelizing communities, beacons that radiate the light of faith and respond to the needs of the whole Family of God.



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