

## Building a Christ-Centered Home: Laying Down Your Life as Foundation

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I am of an age where many of my friends' children are getting married, and so I have attended a number of bridal showers over the past few years. A common activity is for the veteran wives to write down their best advice for the couple, usually on some small surface such as an index card, sticky note, or popsicle stick. These notes are then put in a bag or box, and then the bride-to-be may read them out loud and try to guess who wrote each one, or perhaps they are sealed and put away to be read by the bride and groom after the wedding.

Either way, you have to condense your best marital advice into a few words. Since I've started doing this, I have given the exact same advice- consisting of 3 words (SLIDE)

Embrace the Cross.

Every time I come home from one of these showers, my husband asks, "You didn't write that again, did you?" I tell him I did, and he usually says something to the effect of "Your friends are going to think I'm a really difficult man to live with." And then we joke about it for a bit. But in truth I am paying a tribute to my husband, or actually his own father, who gave him this advice by word and example during his childhood. My father-in-law, who I never had the privilege to meet, told my husband in plain words that to be married meant to be willing to be crucified and die for one's spouse. But more importantly, he lived this out daily and concretely. My husband's mother was ill for much of his childhood, and his father, who was a college professor, not only

dealt with his wife's illness, but would come home after teaching to do the laundry, cook, all the jobs necessary to keep a family with 4 children running smoothly.

This advice shouldn't surprise us-for example, the Catholic Church teaches that marriage is a sign of Christ's love for his Church, and we know he gave his life for her. But it's not a common message in our culture. In fact, we had a good friend in graduate school whose wife left him several years into their marriage- she told him there was not enough passion in their marriage. This good man called us, heartbroken, to tell us the news, and he said he didn't understand what had happened- he loved her so much he had been willing to die for her. I remember thinking at the time, "This poor woman- she was blinded to the passion right in front of her, and would likely never find such true passion again".

And so I stand by my advice-the kind of passion this woman was seeking was self-serving and empty. I would put my money on the kind of passion my friend wanted to offer his wife, the kind of passion my father-in-law hoped to pass down to his son- a love that is willing to die for another. And it has been my own experience with our family that this sacrificial love forms the very core of marriage, of family life, and that Christ would go to any lengths to conform our hearts to this truth.

If you want the short version of my talk, I can write it on an index card, and we can call it a day.

But I will give you a bit longer version- first, so that you don't think my husband is such a difficult man to live with; also, because we are not here today to simply celebrate the beautiful teachings we share on the family- we are not interested in just protecting and defending what we have. We are both missionary people- we want to share this vision of the family with the world

because we believe that the happiness and flourishing of humankind will come from living out marriage as God intended it, and, in establishing families which are communities of life and love.

The cross, however, taken by itself, is a difficult starting point for evangelization. The cross only makes sense in context- when we understand the unfathomable love that led Christ to it, and know the infinite mercy and eternal life that sprung from it. And so I want to put the cross within the context of the love necessary for family life to flourish.

As you know, the theme for this conference is “Building a Christ-Centered Home”- Let me back up a bit and explain my interest in this topic. As I was preparing for today, I realized I have been interested in this idea since I was a small child.

Yesterday would have been my parents’ 55<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, if my father had not passed away 5 years ago. I am incredibly grateful to them-they were good parents- hard working and faithful- my brothers and sister and I were well educated in our faith. We attended Sunday Mass together as a family, and often with my mother during the week. For whatever reason though, outside of Church, and grace before meals, we rarely prayed together as a family. We prayed with my parents, but individually- one or the other of them always went around in the evenings and prayed with us in our rooms before bed.

A very beautiful custom, and a reassuring way to go to bed as a child, but I longed for something more. And this more was what I saw happening at my aunt and uncle’s house. When I spent the night there, they knelt down together with their 6 children in their living room in front of an image of Christ, and spent time in prayer together- the particular prayer they happened to say was the rosary.

The image that hung in their living room was that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus- (SLIDE) this image is instantly recognizable to Catholics- for those who are not Catholic, it is an image of Christ with his heart exposed- it might seem strange or morbid to those not used to it, but it is meant to remind us of the immense love Christ has for us, and give us confidence that we can approach without fear one who loves us so much.

We have a very old tradition of placing this image in a central location in our homes, and when we do so, we call this the enthronement of the Sacred Heart. Obviously, we don't put the picture on a throne, but this language is so beautiful, because it captures our desire for Jesus to reign as King of our families, sovereign of our homes. Families often gather in front of the image to pray because it serves as a powerful reminder of the loving savior to whom we pray.

Likewise, for those not familiar with the Rosary, it is a very old simple prayer, consisting of a series of Our Fathers, and the words addressed to Mary, the mother of God, in the new testament. While saying the words out loud, we meditate on the events of the life of Christ. It is particularly suited to family life, because the words are so simple that small children can learn them, and yet because we are meditating on the events of Christ's life, we could spend our whole lives praying the rosary and never exhaust the riches of contemplating them.

At any rate, in my child's mind, I thought these practices explained why my cousins' family often seemed happier than my own. I loved my family, but I longed for more harmony, greater peace, and I was sure that family prayer like theirs was the key to this.

I never forgot the impression my aunt and uncle's home made on me, and when my husband and I married and started our own family, I told him I wanted to live like this- I wanted Christ to be the Center and King of our home, I wanted to have a visible sign of this, to remind ourselves

daily of our desire for Christ's presence, and I wanted family prayer to be the cornerstone of all that we did.

And so we began, as so many of you have I'm sure, to try to build a home that was rooted in Christ.

And the practices I mentioned were just the beginning. My generation of Catholics – I was born in 1965-was the first raised at the very beginning and during the early years of the great social experiments of the 60's and early 70's- unbridled sexual activity outside of marriage, contraception, abortion, etc.

And so to counter this, to live out what we believed was God's plan for marriage and new life, we felt keenly the need to build our homes and our families on a solid foundation- to create environments where our children could come to know Christ and learn their faith, and where this faith could be nurtured and mature- safe havens from which we could go out and live the gospel.

In looking for ways to live out our faith and make it concrete to our children, my husband and friends and I felt somewhat like kids in a candy store- we discovered or rediscovered many of the riches of our tradition which were well suited to family life.

For example, the Catholic Church follows a liturgical calendar- there are whole seasons of fasting and feasting which center around the great feasts of our Church such as Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, but also smaller feasts- on different days we remember and celebrate the lives of the holy men and women of our faith who have gone before us and give us examples of lives focused on Christ.

And so at home we echoed this rhythm of the Church with fasts and special foods for feast days, with prayers which corresponded to the liturgical seasons, with crafts and stories and activities which made the truths of our faith concrete for our children. And as the Church cares for its members and also for the poor outside its doors, we too tried to live this out as a family.

This idea that the family echoes the larger church, is a Church in miniature, if you will, has been around since the beginning of Christianity, but more recently was reemphasized in the 1960's at the Second Vatican Council of the Church. – the formal name for this is the “Domestic Church”  
**(Slide)**

And so if you had asked me 20, 25 years ago, to talk about building a Christ –Centered home, I would have talked about my husband's and my efforts to build up our own Domestic Church in unity with the whole Church- our prayers and fasting, our celebrating and serving each other- none ends in themselves, but all designed to help us to encounter and love Christ more fully, and each other in Christ.

And it would have been a fine talk, because all of these things, or whatever it is in your own tradition that helps lead your family to Christ, are necessary and important. God desires that we use all of our resources- our intellect, our wills, our creativity and energy and all of our strength to serve him in our vocations, and the primary task of parents is teach our children about and lead them to Christ, as we strive to become holy ourselves.

But after almost 27 years of marriage, I find myself called to give a different kind of talk. In setting about as a young parent to build a good home, there is the danger- and I only mention this because I think I was susceptible to it- of pride. We can see this work of creating a Christ

centered home as a project- a good project- in fact the most important project we can embark on in our marriage, but still a project which we are in control of, with our own ideas of what such a home will look like.

But what I have discovered, and what becomes clearer with the passing of each year, is that to create a Christ-Centered home is not primarily about what we do, as good as it may be, it is not about control, but total and utter abandonment to Christ.

We are not centering our homes on ideals or precepts, but on a Person- a Person who is not only alive but the source of all life, who is all good, all wise, and all powerful. So building a Christ-centered home is not a project as much as it is an invitation – an invitation for Christ to come into our homes, our lives, our hearts, and transform us according to his will- for our salvation, the salvation of our children, and the whole world.

From the beginning God's plan for salvation of humanity has passed through the family-generation by generation. Nowhere is this spelled out more clearly than in the genealogy that begins the gospel of Mathew: (SLIDE) As Catholics this is the Gospel reading we hear on Christmas every three years- we have a cycle of readings that repeats every three years.

This reading can seem a bit tedious on Christmas- (go through slides- you can see how long it is) to hear the long list of difficult to pronounce and obscure names – but our previous Pope, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in a beautiful reflection on this Gospel, SLIDE “that it shows us that Jesus was a man woven into a human history with its ups and down. He was the fruit of a lengthy path, and the ultimate goal of this path was to bring forth the Christ. Since it is also the genealogy of Abraham, it teaches us something about God's faithfulness: through all the detours of human history, God keeps his promise. He does not forget the assurances he has given. God is

not silent. He remains true to himself, and he knows how to open up a path for his fidelity, despite all the wrong turns taken by men.”

I don't know if the end of this passage will strike you the way it struck me- but I was surprised by the use of words – “He knows how to open up a path for *his fidelity*”. I would have said, I think, that God opens up a path for the fidelity of *his people*- the Chosen people were continually going astray (as we do) and it makes sense to think that God opened up new paths for *them* to be faithful- giving them yet one more chance to come back to him.

But Benedict's turn of phrase, I think, is striking- “He opens up a path for *his fidelity to us*”

Christ has already come and redeemed the world, and yet today we are still on a path to salvation- our own and everyone else's on earth, and we are moving towards the end of time as well (SLIDE) -- as Paul so beautifully writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, when ” God will be all in all.” And this path, which continues to our ultimate end, like that of the Israelites, is woven into human history- all of our families – each generation is a part of it.

And so how beautiful, how reassuring to think that our own small family histories, our own paths, will not be primarily stories of our own faithfulness to Christ, (although this is important and certainly we strive for this) but stories of Christ's faithfulness to us. The events which happen, the people He places in our lives, including our spouses and children, will open up paths for him to show us anew his fidelity.

With all of his heart he desires our salvation, and when we invite him into our family will be faithful to us by leading us more closely to him, transforming our lives and our family so we can be united with him. But the paths he opens may not be the paths we would have chosen ourselves.

As I was writing this I was reminded of CS Lewis' description of Aslan, the Christ-like figure in his allegorical story: (SLIDE) You might remember that one of the children asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is safe. (SLIDE) "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." A character in a later book in the series, the Dawn Treader repeats this in slightly different words when says "it's not as if he were a tame lion."

To ask Christ to be the Center of our homes is to embark on the greatest adventure of our lives- but it not entirely safe- we cannot expect to draw up a neat plan of what our family will look like and ask Christ to follow along. Certainly he honors our desires, our free will, but He asks us to follow **him** instead- and he may lead us along unfamiliar paths, and the way might not always be easy or even clear.

He asked this of his own family, too -- his own mother-- Benedict XVI again offers a helpful insight into this when, in talking about the end of the angel's announcement to Mary that she is to bear the Son of God, he says (SLIDE)

"The great hour of Mary's encounter with God's messenger — in which her whole life is changed — comes to an end, and she remains there alone, with the task that truly surpasses all human capacity. There are no angels standing round her. She must continue along the path that leads through many dark moments — from Joseph's dismay at her pregnancy to the moment when Jesus is said to be out of his mind, right up to the night of the Cross."

Mary's home literally had Christ at the center, and yet she was led along difficult paths. It is not as if Christ did not have the power to make things easier- He is all powerful, with the power to heal the sick, to calm seas and move mountains. But just as the Jewish people were caught off guard by Christ- he was not the warrior King some imagined he would be- we can be caught off guard by the power Christ most often uses to work in our lives.

Pope Francis touched on this in his *Christmas message* in 2016. "The power of this Child, Son of God and Son of Mary, is not the power of this world, based on might and wealth," he said. "It is the power of love. ... It is the power which gives new birth, pardons faults, reconciles enemies, and transforms evil into good. It is the power of God. This power of love led Jesus Christ to strip himself of his glory and become man; it led him to give his life on the Cross."

Our own experience of desiring a life centered on Christ has been the realization of what this power can accomplish in a family. Our own attempts to place Christ at the Center of our Home, have been good, perhaps, but feeble compared to the infinite power of Christ, Love itself, who has graciously accepted our invitation to come into our family and been faithful to us. He has not only shown us and continues to show us what sacrificial love looks like, but has asked us to imitate him, to pour out our lives in love for each other.

My husband and I got married in graduate school-- no money but happy as clams with each other and our studies and our cheap student housing. We had our first 2 children with no problems- a boy and then a girl- beautiful healthy babies. And then we became pregnant with our third child-

a little girl named Mary Elizabeth, and it seemed like an embarrassment of riches- we felt so blessed. But 7 months into the pregnancy I woke up one day and couldn't feel her move. Her death was confirmed by an ultrasound later that day.

We were absolutely devastated by this news –it's difficult to describe the excruciating pain of delivering a child who has already died. We had a strong faith in God, but struggled to comprehend why he would allow such suffering to be a part of his plan for our family.

The seeds of the answer to this question were planted in the homily that was said at her funeral about a week later.

The priest, a good friend of ours, talked about the love we had for each other and the love we had for our daughter, and continued: (Slide)

“But then love is confronted with death; and like water thrown on burning oil the confrontation is explosive, with an explosion that cuts us to the heart. Death is contrary to the very nature of love and we are wretched and we recoil and we cry out, why me, Lord, why have you abandoned me? But in our pain and in our questioning, comes a still quiet voice; maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but a voice without words speaks, and it says, ‘This is how I love you, this is what it was like for me to love my children.’ It’s a voice from the cross.”

And the priest was right- these words, this understanding, did not come immediately. And anyone who has suffered a loss knows that there are no words or explanations that can satisfy completely –especially in the beginning when grief is raw and painful. We can know intellectually that God is good, does not will suffering, that suffering exists in our fallen state,

and God allows it only because greater good can come from it. But this side of eternity, it is hard to imagine a greater good than the lives and presence of those we love, and so we have to take it on faith that God will bring good from this.

And while there is no simple answer to suffering, nonetheless, for some reason He allowed us to share in his sacrificial love, the love he bore on the cross. And we had much occasion to ponder this and let the truth of the words from the funeral homily sink into our hearts. We later had another daughter, Sophie, who was stillborn, as well as 6 miscarriages at various stages of pregnancy.

There was not much we could do but cling to the knowledge that Christ had also suffered. Because of this we could join our suffering to his and ask that, like his, it bear fruit. I don't know that we will fully know the fruits of this suffering in this life.

But we have seen some perhaps small fruits of this in our family.

For example, we were blessed, in the 10 years after Mary Elizabeth's death, with 3 more living children. When our fifth child, Tommy, was born with Down syndrome, we were able to greet him with pure and unadulterated joy. We had seen so much death, that we were able to perceive his life immediately for what it was: a good and perfect gift. I was thankful for all of my children, but I don't think my soul ever sang such a hymn of thanksgiving to God as it did as I prepared to take him home with us—no matter what his challenges might be I was so grateful for the chance to love this child who was simply and fully alive.

If the deaths of our children allowed us to share in small way in the mystery of Christ's love and suffering on the cross, Tommy's life has shown us the more ordinary and even joyful way that most of us are called to lay down our lives for each other.

Not too long ago, I read a story on the internet of a mother who decided to abort her child with Down syndrome after she watched a family with such a child out in a restaurant. She recounted with evident horror how the parents had to feed the child pizza, wipe his face afterwards, and then do some chasing of their son about the restaurant. She decided that such a life would be too burdensome for her and her husband.

This hit home for me because this easily could have been my son- except that he can't even eat pizza- he still eats mostly pureed foods. Tommy was born with a large hole in his heart, and by the time he had gained enough weight and the surgeons lost hope that it might repair on its own, he had so much fluid in his lungs that he couldn't eat and breathe at the same time. As a result, he developed a severe feeding disorder and needed a g-tube. He has slowly learned to accept food but still needs a lot of help to eat.

And he needs help from us to get through most of his day- he still struggles with potty- training, with dressing himself, writing his name, and so many other things that most 10 year olds can do by themselves.

And so I suppose from the outside his life could look like a burden, a heavy cross to carry. But my husband and I have learned that we can lay down our lives for him, can stretch ourselves in terms of time and patience and resources, much further than we ever thought possible, because love lightens these burdens so much, and makes them easy, even joyful.

Mother Theresa once said: I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love”, and we have found this to be true in our life with him.

Our children have learned this, too, without us having to say a word. All of my children are close to Tommy, but one daughter in particular was around more when he was smaller, and she assumed much of his care. I have heard of parents, too, who have aborted their children with disabilities because they didn't want their existing children to be burdened with such a sibling.)

If my son is a burden, then I am so grateful for this burden, because my daughter learned from an early age to carry someone else's burdens with such love that she made it look effortless. She loved my son with the totality of her being and her care for him flowed from this like music.

When she was as young as 10 or 11 she would walk into a room where he was, assess what he might need- (a bath, a diaper change, a tube feeding?)- and scoop him up in her little arms and carry him off ( he didn't walk until he was 4) and do whatever needed doing. Never complaining, but laughing, talking, singing, telling him stories.

She is almost 19 now, and still loves him fiercely (to the moon and back, they tell each other), but she carries a heavy burden of her own. The serious illness that my husband's mother suffered from was clinical depression, and 2 of my own children have inherited a tendency toward this cruel disease as well, including my daughter,

She is a brave girl and fights it valiantly, but it has been rough going. And who do you think now helps her carry her burden? Tommy, like his sister before him, does this as naturally as his own breathing. She's in college now, but when she was in high school and would come home after a rough day, he would go right up to her, size up her mood, "You happy, Caroline?" and when she answered no, would wrap his little arms around her, saying, "Come here, I make you happy. I

make you feel better, huh?” And because in the innocence and sweet simplicity of his love for her, he believed he could make her feel better, she did feel better. No, he couldn’t cure her depression, but he helped her bear it, and I am convinced that it was his love that got her through the darkest days and continues to do so.

Thankfully she goes to school close to home, and he visits as much as he can, still trying to make her happy. And whenever he is in trouble, sick or scared -at the doctor’s perhaps- he calls out for her- so certain of her love for him, knowing that she is his staunchest protector and defender.

As a young mother, thinking and dreaming about our family, I would not have chosen these crosses for them. And yet Christ, as center and ruler of our home, allowed them. He has the power to cure the sick, to calm the seas and move mountains. He could have taken away their crosses, but instead he used his power to draw from their crosses a love I could not have dreamed of.

John Paul II, in 1984, writing on suffering and love, said “Following the parable of the Gospel, we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order *to unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's "I" on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world: the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions”.

This notion of suffering unleashing love explains I think, why John Paul would later write that the family was a school of “deeper humanity” most especially when it involves caring for those members who are weaker or suffering (SLIDE) .

“All members of the family, each according to his or her own gift, have the grace and responsibility of building, day by day, the communion of persons, making the family ‘a school of deeper humanity’:

SLIDE

this happens where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows.”

This notion that the family is a school of humanity suggests that we should be changed by our life together- become, as JP II says, “more deeply human” – especially when suffering of those in our family calls us to deeper, more unselfish love.

Ultimately, to live in a Christ-Centered home, means that we allow ourselves to be transformed by him, and in my experience, this means we learn, by whatever means he uses to lead us there, to love as he did, laying down our lives for each other.

I was staying at a Ronald McDonald house once with my son, and I was in the kitchen preparing his food, and half listening to a conversation between 2 volunteers who had come to cook the residents’ dinner. So these were good women, engaged in a charitable act. But they were discussing, with much seriousness and conviction, how they had put in their time caring for their children when they were young, and now it was their “Me Time”. They both discussed how they set limits on how much they would help their grown children, particularly with caring for the grandchildren.

I must have looked a little puzzled, as I juggled my son and the blender with his food, because they turned to me and one said in prophetic tones “Don’t you worry- you’ll see- you’ll have your” me time” someday!”. I think I laughed politely, thinking “Can’t they see I have a child who may always depend on me?”

But as I thought about this later, I thought how strange this was. A family is not like a job where we put in our time for a while and then retire with our feet up, a momentary foray into service before we can retreat back into selfishness.

The demands of love in a family – serving each other, suffering for and with each other, forgiving each other – are so radical that they should shake us to the very core- they should cure of us our selfishness so that we can love as Christ does, with our whole being, without reserve, without cost.

I will end with telling you another story of the power of Christ to transform suffering into selfless love in our own family.

When I was preparing for marriage, I read a book by a Catholic philosopher, Alice von Hildebrand. This small book, “By Love Refined”, was a series of fictional letters between an older woman and a young bride- in some ways a simple book, but with profound insights. One idea that has remained with me is the notion that when we first fall in love with our spouse, we are given a vision of them as they truly are- as God intends them to be.

The older woman writes: “When you fell in love with Michael (the fictional husband), you were given a great gift: your love took you past appearances and granted you a perception of his true self, who he’s meant to be in the deepest sense of the word.”

She calls this the “Tabor vision” of the spouse – likening it to the Gospel story in which Jesus’ apostles are granted a vision of him clothed in splendor on Mt. Tabor. This vision was meant to sustain them through the suffering and death of Christ.

Likewise, this vision of our spouse can sustain us through difficult times, if we keep it alive to remind us of why we married our husband or wife in the first place. For me, this was a helpful notion, especially in those early years of marriage when we were still polishing up the rough edges of our relationship.

But I have found, after almost 27 years, that I no longer need this Tabor vision- I look at my husband now and see clearly the man God intended him to be. He has not embarked on some self-improvement scheme, he has simply responded with love to Christ’s plea to take up his cross and follow him. He has followed him down the path of our children’s deaths, he has followed him as he cares for our son Tommy with great love and patience. He has followed him down the difficult path of our older children’s illness. Every day he takes up his cross for all of us. He gets up early every morning, praying for us and getting some housework done before work and then works a full day to provide for us. Even at work he drops everything if any of the children need him. He comes home in the evening and prepares dinner so I am free to care for of our son and the other children.

And he does this cheerfully without complaint, as though it were his greatest privilege to serve us. In this school of humanity which is our family, he has learned to love like Christ does, laying down his life, as his father did before him.

And this is how salvation continues to pass through the family, each generation, each family, taking up their crosses, dying to self for love of the others, bearing Christ to each other and the whole world, until all things are subject to Christ, and Christ is subject to the Father, and God is all in all.

Thank you.

