

Traditio — The Ordinary Handling of Holy Things

Reflections *de doctrina christiana* from an Ecclesiology Ordered to Baptism

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There seems to have been a growing consensus in recent generations that, when we think about “hearing and speaking the Word”, we must have reference not only to scripture, and the “official church teaching”, but also to that more hidden expression of the Word “in the world”, or in human experience. Indeed, a number of papers in this conference have drawn our attention to the importance of the arts, popular culture, “the signs of the times” in both communicating and listening to what God might be saying to us in our own context. Whilst not entirely disagreeing with this reading – which is, after all, implied by our theology of grace and the goodness of God’s creation, – this paper, as an ecclesiological study, wishes to take a slightly different perspective. In particular, it seeks to demonstrate how ecclesiology is essential for this reading of “worldly graces”. It is only when we are formed by, and informed by, and steeped in the articulate Christian revelation that we can recognise what is, indeed, good, beautiful, and graced. Put bluntly, I’m a Catholic – with all that implies in terms of liturgy, sacrament, and order of life – so as to be *able* to attend to and communicate the reality of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. I couldn’t do it on my own, outside “the tradition”. WE need the church in order to hear and speak God’s Word.

Now our response to this preposterous sounding assertion will depend entirely on what and where you think church is. In what follows I want to argue for the taking up of an understanding of church from the (presently) unusual perspective of the Christian household – or the “domestic church.” Above all, it is the day to day experience and living of that tradition which determines the hermeneutical effectiveness of my faith in relation to the hearing and speaking of God’s Word. This demands, I suggest, an ecclesiology in ordinary, an ecclesiology thoroughly ordered to (at the service of) baptism.

By Way of Explaining the Title

So it is that we will begin with Baptism, as the fundamental way of speaking about church.

In the rather cryptic entitling of this paper I have in mind what Aquinas has to say in his *Summa Theologiae* about the “character” conferred in baptism. For Aquinas the core meaning of sacramental character is that it refers us to that effect of certain sacraments by which a person is spiritually marked out for the service of divine worship, the *cultus Dei*:

In order to perform acts appropriate to the church as she exists in the present [the *Ecclesia praesens* – the church of our historical living, as distinct from the *Ecclesia aeterna*] they [Christ’s faithful] are deputed by a certain spiritual seal imprinted upon them which is called character.¹

Character is, then, a *potestas spiritualis* – a spiritual faculty, possibility, or potential – which relates specifically to that divine worship which is the Church’s vocation.

Now divine worship consists either in receiving some divine things or in handing them on to others (*in tradendo aliis*). And a certain power (*quaedam potentia*) is needed for both these activities. For in order to hand something on to others an active power is required, while to receive them we need a passive power. And this is why character denotes a certain spiritual power ordered to those things which pertain to divine worship.²

So it is that, through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and orders, each of the faithful is marked by a sacramental character, a spiritual faculty, signifying that they have been deputed “to receive or to hand on to others (*tradendum aliis*) the things pertaining to the worship of God (*ea quae pertinent ad cultum Dei*).”³ This is our participation in Christ – and specifically in his priesthood – from whom all sacramental life derives.⁴ This is, I suggest, what it is to be church: to be participants in Christ, sacramentally commissioned for the handing on and receiving of things pertaining to divine worship. This is my starting place for ecclesiology; and it is this baptismal context which will frame this paper’s consideration of that particular “handing on” which is our concern – Christian teaching.

It is the language of receiving and handing on (*tradere*), this reference in the call of baptismal character to the ecclesial activity

¹ ST III 63.1, ‘Sed ad actus conveniences praesenti Ecclesiae deputantur quondam spirituali signaculo eis insignitur, quod character enunciat.’

² ST III 63.2, ‘Divinus autem cultus consistit vel in recipiendo aliqua divina, vel in tradendo aliis.’

³ ST III 63.3, ‘. . . deputatur unique fidelis ad recipient vel tradendum aliis ea quae pertinent ad cultum Dei.’

⁴ *Ibid.* The fundamentally Christological nature of sacraments is clear in the *Summa Theologiae*’s structure, as well as in the detailed discussion of the sacraments.

of *traditio*, which is so striking. It is this that moves me to link at a sacramental (ontological?) level, baptism and Christian teaching. In this question of the *Summa Theologiae*, of course, those things that are handed on through the spiritual potentiality which is conferred by sacramental character, are specifically, those things pertaining to divine worship, the *cultus Dei*. We can read Aquinas' reflections on the *cultus Dei* here simply in terms of a limited notion of ritual worship, of liturgy in its most restricted, cultic sense. Similarly we may feel bound to interpret the 'active' and 'passive' powers of character to which Aquinas refers, in terms of specific sacraments of character: thus, orders conveys that character by which holy things are handed on (*potentia activa*, an active potential), whilst baptism confers that "passive potential" (*potentia passiva* - such an interesting concept!) by which we receive those things. However, for this paper, I want to depart somewhat from these rather cultic or ritual emphases, (and so from Aquinas), and allow for a broader understanding of "divine worship". Working with late twentieth century and contemporary understandings of the gracedness of the ordinary, and the impossibility of any non-porous boundary between sacred and secular⁵, this argument assumes the possibility of encounter with divine revelation, the Word of God, in the ordinary activities of the world, and so seeks to enlarge the notion of *cultus Dei*, whilst consistently referring it to that source and summit of church life which is the sacred liturgy, Word and sacrament. It is in this context that the baptismal vocation to *traditio*, and its essential place in the ecclesial vocation to Christian teaching, is to be thought through.

By enlarging the notion of *cultus Dei* to include the non-ritual worship of Christian life –which includes that handing on of the things of God which is Christian teaching – I want to focus in a fresh way on the baptismal vocation of *traditio* as lived in the ordinary context of men and women living "in the world".⁶ This focus on the ordinary baptismal vocation turns our attention to that basic cell

⁵ There is a story to be told here about the pre-Vatican II *Nouvelle Theologie*, its appropriation into sacramental thinking and its contribution to contemporary versions of "sacramentality". One clear account of this can be found in K Osborne, *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World* (Paulist Press 1999) chapter 1.

⁶ I have had here to condense drastically this assumption of a "bigger" notion of Christian worship, sourced from a variety of twentieth-century and contemporary thinkers in sacramental theology and ethics. So see C Watkins, 'Mass, Mission and Eucharistic Living', *Heythrop Journal*, October 2003 I have also been helped by Herwi Rikhof's treatment of sacramental character in Aquinas in relation to understanding of the sacrament of marriage: H Rikhof, 'Marriage, a Question of Character?' in *Intams Review* Autumn 1996. Here Professor Rikhof argues that a major factor which prevents Aquinas attributing 'character' to marriage is that marriage confers a potential for the handling of things which are not, of themselves, 'spiritual', for all that it nurtures the life of the church. A contemporary reading of 'things handled in marriage'(!) would generally seek to give a different account of what is 'spiritual' and 'corporeal', allowing for a different reading of the activity of *traditio* in marriage, and its relation to the *cultus Dei*.

of human and Christian growth, the household; or, more specifically, what has been called in the recent public language of the church, the *ecclesia domestica* – the “domestic church.” It is here, I will argue, that ecclesiology needs to look for the much-needed reinvigoration of Christian teaching.

The Church Today: Pastoral Problems and the Shortcomings of Ecclesiology.

To turn our ecclesiological attention to that rather cosy-sounding, provincial and conservative term “the domestic church”⁷ is, in fact, to call for a renewal of our sense of church as radically ordered to baptism. Far from being “conservative”, it suggests a calling into question of (modern) conventional ways of working with church as organisational, political, structural, institutional. At the same time, the domestic church’s emphasis on the sanctity of household relationships, with their particular, every-day ties, duties and responsibilities, refers us to a primary discipline of affection or *agape* which challenges the pastorally burdensome emphasis on church as *koinonia*, interpreted practically as “community”, “fellowship”, and the like. Discussion of the “domestic church” recalls our thinking to the ways in which all church activity – liturgy, order, governance, and, of course, teaching – is to be ordered to the living of baptism.⁸ And this baptismal living is – for the most part – done “in ordinary”. The nurturing of and equipping for this baptismal vocation in ordinary is, perhaps, *the* way of understanding the church’s life and purpose, and the end to which all teaching in the Christian community is directed.

These assertions will be given greater substance in what follows. I make them now so as to make clear that, in speaking of “domestic church” or Christian household, this paper understands itself to speak, fundamentally, of church, understood as nothing less than

⁷ I am aware that, with reason, this appears an unfortunate term to many. Its clear identification in papal teaching with the “nuclear family” presents difficulties in our own context, where households are made up of a far more diverse range of relationships. There are risks here which, as David Matzko McCarthy points out, any attempt to speak of family today runs.: D Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home. A Theology of the household* (SCM 2004). Something like Matzko McCarthy’s reading of ‘the open home’ which allows him to speak of the ‘core’ of marriage and the family, whilst attentive to and aware of the ‘irregular life cycle which is natural to the open home’ (p. 198) is reflected in this paper.

⁸ This is *not*, we should be clear to say, that orders, liturgy, etc. are *derived* from baptism in some congregational way. Rather it draws attention to the understanding articulated at the Second Vatican council of those offices and rites as divinely given for and lived out in service of the life of holiness among Christ’s faithful. For example, ‘He [Christ] continually provides in his body, that is, in the Church, for gifts and ministries through which, by his power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we may in all things grow unto him who is our head.’ *Lumen Gentium* 7

the life of baptism. “Domestic church” is not merely some “soft”, pastorally descriptive heading for home-spun anecdotes on the Christian family. Rather it is an aspect of a self-conscious re-orientation of ecclesiology towards its source and end – life in Christ, for men and women of the world.

The intention to pattern ecclesiological thinking in ways consistently ordered to ordinary baptismal living is, primarily, pastorally motivated. A recurrent and powerful aspect of this pastoral concern is what is, and is not, happening in terms of Christian teaching in the life of the church today. In our own context we are surrounded by a plethora of diocesan pastoral plans, programmes for renewal, and strategies for the future.⁹ These documents in strategic thinking and ecclesial re-organisation witness to a church at best facing a time of accelerated change, and at worst, in crisis: numbers of clergy are falling drastically, parishes merging and closing, priests being required to serve two and more parishes, and laity are being called upon to carry ever increasing administrative and catechetical responsibilities, just to keep the system going. At the same time, numbers of lay people participating in the sacramental life of the church are dropping, and the societal identity of the church itself is continually held in question in a pluralist, and often relativist, wider cultural context.¹⁰ In all this, the calls to evangelisation and to renewal, to a re-awakened sense of the basic Christian tasks of mission and transmission are the recurring and central themes. Christian teaching is, it seems, an essential ingredient for any recipe for the future life and vitality of the church. Or, at least, education, catechesis, courses, training, and programmes are.

This latter is an important distinction in making clear the ecclesiological short-comings of many of the present efforts in church renewal and pastoral planning. For what is spoken of, by and large, in these texts are particular kinds of pragmatic training, which generally fall some considerable way short of that vision of Christian teaching of which Augustine speaks, and to which, in various ways, the Catholic theological tradition has attested.

At the same time as the prevailing managerial culture in practical ecclesiology is adopting such an instrumentalisation of education for its own organisational survival, we are developing theologically weak resources for parish catechesis and schools’ religious education. Indeed, “teaching” as such is in practice often considered highly

⁹ For example: the Archdiocese of Westminster’s so-called Green Paper – soon to be a White Paper; the Diocese of East Anglia’s *Forward and Outward Together*; the Diocese of Portsmouth’s *Go Out and Bear Fruit*; et al. Details are available through the diocesan websites.

¹⁰ This is well described in Part I of the CES (Catholic Education Service) commissioned document *On the Way to Life* (2005) authored out of the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life.

inappropriate to either childhood or adult catechesis,¹¹ with the emphasis being, rather, on sharing faith experience (shared ignorance?), personal story-telling, and that appallingly intractable notion that faith is *not* indeed taught, but caught. I would have thought by now that the well-intentioned notion that if you just hang around at Mass, and your catholic school long enough, then you'll pick up "life in Christ" as if it were a highly contagious virus, is thoroughly discredited. But still, it persists.

We do know, of course, that Christian teaching cannot be simply about "instruction", or the learning of "facts", or being told things. Christian teaching, as both Augustine and Aquinas testify, is, in the end, about bringing the person into an encounter with God revealed in the person of Jesus. Its aims are charity, and sanctity, built on the mysterious Truth which is the God who is Trinity.¹² This is, as one recent commentary on the task of education in today's church remarks, properly 'untranslatable'.¹³ Our linking of Christian teaching with the ecclesial activity of *traditio* keeps us mindful, too, of the ways in which, as Congar authoritatively pointed out, tradition has all the complexity of the entire life of the church – its history, its worship, its charity.¹⁴ To be sure, hearing and speaking the Word is not *only* about words.

However, to neglect the articulation of tradition or of revelation is to risk cutting apart the intellectual and the affective or lived, as if they were quite distinct, even separate parts of the person.¹⁵ Our ecclesial shyness about explicit "teaching of the faith" runs the risk of cutting the muddles and ambiguities of Christian living adrift from its own memories, its connection with the generations of learning and listening which is the school of the communion of saints. Our present over-emphasis on the wordlessness of the Word in catechesis is in danger of leaving generations of the baptised empty-handed, with nothing to hand on.

Here I have in mind the many groups of Christian parents I have worked with in pastoral ministry, often in relation to the catechesis of our children. In this place the general sense of empty-handedness, lack of confidence, lack of vocabulary and understanding is one of the great tragedies and, indeed, scandals of contemporary church life.

¹¹ A currently influential example of this would be *RENEW International* (www.renewintl.org), the basis of the Westminster Diocesan renewal programme *At Your Word Lord*.

¹² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (OUP 1999) in which the language of love is intertwined with the language of learning; e.g. p. 20ff. Thomas Aquinas's pedagogy is, perhaps, best summed up in *De Veritate* Question 11.

¹³ *On the Way to Life*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Y M J Congar OP, *La Tradition et les Traditions* (Paris 1963).

¹⁵ See my argument in 'Sacraments, Spirituality and Reality', *The Way* (April 2004) pp. 91–103.

It is of little surprise, in the light of this experience, to find that in the report of *Listening 2004*, it is precisely the area of ‘handing on faith’ in the home which was presented as the area of ‘most anxiety’.¹⁶ This – the locus of the domestic church – is, for me, where any talk of a “crisis in Christian teaching” should be referred: to Christian households where there can be no speech about faith, because no language has been learnt, where there is no *traditio*, or handing on, because hands are all but empty.

There is nothing very new in these pastoral observations. Reminding ourselves of them here serves to sharpen the ecclesiological significance of the domestic church, through a pastoral-ecclesial reading of our context. This pastoral reference also suggests something of an ecclesiological challenge.

The precise nature of this challenge may be read differently, depending on the theological and specifically ecclesiological assumptions we bring to it. My own interpretation of these pastoral testimonies is this: that there is a very real and tragic loss of the practice of *traditio* in the most fundamental – and, it should be noted, pedagogically effective¹⁷ – locus of Christian life, the locus of family or household. This highlights a certain ecclesiological failure in the ordering of church life and structures to the nurturing of the ordinary living of baptism. Symptomatic of this failure, I suggest, is the ecclesiastical response to the crisis in Christian teaching and transmission, in terms of administrative and marketing strategies, which adopt, in the main, instrumental, skills-orientated models of education on the one hand and theologically “soft”, affective and experience-based programmes for community bonding on the other. The Christian man or woman, seeking to live their baptismal call to *traditio* in the ordinary setting of family or household, is continually called away from this context to contribute, instead, to the maintenance of a more manageable, structured, organisational kind of church – indeed, a clerical kind of church. In all this the domestic church is seen, at best, as a pious description of people’s home lives and, at worst, as an area of life so problematic and fraught that we can barely speak of it, except as a part of the problem. Its dignity and ecclesial vocation as the privileged place of *traditio*, and the living of

¹⁶ Not easy, but full of meaning’, *Catholic Family Life in 2004. A Report on the Findings of Listening 2004: My Family, My Church* (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 2005), see paras. 90–104.

¹⁷ The insistent repetition in ecclesial documents that parents are ‘the first teachers’ of children is not simply wishful thinking but a rather chilling reminder (at least for those of us who are parents) that, *whether we attend to it or not*, children primarily learn whatever they learn from an intimate observation of parents and the home. No amount of even the most excellent catechesis can entirely overcome or take the place of this primary formation.

baptism is lost in what is assumed, from an organisational ecclesiological perspective, to be the “bigger” picture.

This ecclesiological interpretation of the pastoral situation is informed by a certain reading of the difficulties that we have had, as a church, in appropriating fully the complex ecclesiology of Vatican II. Time does not allow for a detailed account of this here. It is enough to say that, for all the rhetoric of an ecclesiology which seeks to move away from the over-institutional emphasis of the first Vatican Council’s ecclesiology, there seems to persist, albeit in new and subtle forms, a particular kind of Vatican II institutional emphasis, which finds its pastoral expression in a prevailing management culture in church leadership and practical life.¹⁸ This, as much as any nineteenth-century model, risks distorting our language of church, when we too readily assume that the properly essential and theologically significant structural or organisational expressions of church *are* in fact the sum total of what church is. We then too quickly assume that renewing the church is about renewing structures, changing strategies; we slip into thinking that committed lay people are those who go to two or three parish committees a week as well as attending Mass; we imagine that “being involved in the church” is a reflection on how much time you spend in parish activities, rather than anything to do with a life of prayer, study and charity. The church is an organisation; and our “membership status” depends on our structural place in and contribution to its organisational polity.

When such a political notion of church prevails, discussions of “Christian teaching” in ecclesiology are often construed in terms of “church teaching” or, more precisely “official church teaching”.¹⁹ What becomes important here is magisterium, the authority to teach, the relation between bishops, Vatican congregations, theologians, and the Pope.²⁰ This has been a highly important cluster of questions to work through, but after it all, we still are a church where parents have little to hand their children; and the preaching in the provincial parish pulpit is still un-nourishing and unchallenging to baptismal living.

¹⁸ This is reflected in the diocesan plans already referred to, but also in contemporary ecclesiological concerns. I would reference here, in the British context, the recent Authority and Governance project in which this seems to be the prevalent culture. Examples of the research can be found in B Hoose (ed.), *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church* (Ashgate 2002).

¹⁹ Such identification of Christian teaching with “official church teaching” is properly set out and regretted by Nicholas Lash in *Easter in Ordinary* (SCM 1988) esp. p. 258ff. Professor Lash does not, here, develop the ecclesiological implications of these observations; though see his essay in B Hoose (ed.) *op.cit.*

²⁰ These are very much the frames of reference for the influential and important work of Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium. Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Gill and Macmillan 1983) responding, of course, to the ecclesiological emphases of Hans Küng in *Infallible? An Enquiry* (Collins 1971).

This is why we need to look at an ecclesiology ordered to baptismal vocation, in which a theology of domestic church holds a particular, and therapeutically important, place for today's troubled church. Yet the energy and emphases of church planning and pastoral life are not directed here. Rather, taking its lead from a certain institutional ecclesiological emphasis, we have focused on more organisational structures for Christian teaching. An ecclesiology explicitly ordered to baptism, such as that referred to in the language of "domestic church", seeks to complement and counterbalance this prevailing understanding of church and so open up fresh possibilities for understanding and practising that baptismal *traditio* which is Christian teaching. In order to see this more clearly something substantial must now be said about this notion of *ecclesia domestica*.

"Domestic Church": the Term in Modern Catholicism, and its Ecclesiological Significance

Although something of the idea of the Christian household as "domestic church" can be sourced in Patristic texts,²¹ in its contemporary usage it appears very much to be part of the legacy of the second Vatican Council, where the particular term appears twice: once in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* 11),²² and again (slightly modified) in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11).²³ In the public language of the church the idea of the Christian family as *ecclesia domestica* has received a particularly high profile, and emphatic use in the writings and speeches of John Paul II, to the point where it appears as almost the normative language for the family. Certainly, Benedict XVI has continued to use the term in broadly the same way, with perhaps some indication of a greater ecclesiological nuance, even anxiety.²⁴ At the same time, post-conciliar writing on

²¹ Notably, Paul VI refers his own use of the term in *Evangelii Nintendo (1975) to a homily of John Chrysostom: EN 70.*

²² In speaking of marriage as (notably) the last in the list of sacraments, the Council Fathers specifically relate the idea of the household as domestic church to the proclamation of the Gospel to children: 'In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents are to be the first preachers of the faith for their children by word and example.'

²³ 'The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members and by family prayer, presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the church.'

²⁴ So see, for example, Benedict XVI's *Address to the Ecclesial diocesan Council of Rome*, 6 June 2005, where there is a certain constructive tension and mutual dependence described between 'the small domestic church' and 'the larger family of the Church'. Of course, the positing of these as two distinctive entities, capable of some kind of interrelation, is itself a questionable starting place as the thrust of this paper's argument will make clear. Rather, 'domestic church' is presented here as an ecclesiological orientation, from which the larger reality of Church (much bigger than structures and politics) can be seen afresh.

marriage and the family, especially for a more popular audience, have used the term “domestic church” widely as descriptive of the Christian household based in baptism and sacramental marriage.²⁵ The task I want to undertake in this section of the paper, is a critical account of the use of the term in the public language of post-conciliar ecclesiology, specifically as seen in papal teaching, which will bring to light some of the ecclesiological and specifically pedagogical importance of the Christian household. As we shall see, the language of “domestic church” has been especially related in papal texts since the Council to transmission of faith, education and evangelisation. However, prior to this a couple of preliminary observations are in order.

First of all, it should be made clear that in the church documents which use the language of domestic church, the reference is always and only to that household which is a Christian family based in the sacrament of marriage.²⁶ In what follows I take this on from those texts, whilst wishing, in the end, to use this specific use of the term as the beginnings of a broader reflection on the ecclesiological and pedagogical significance of Christian households understood more diversely. My remarks so far in this paper have reflected that broader understanding and usage of the term, rather than the specific use we find in recent papal teaching.²⁷

A second observation concerns the provenance of the thinking behind the term “domestic church” itself. For, whilst it is true that its contemporary use is most directly traceable to the texts of the second Vatican Council, it should also be remembered that the idea of the Christian family or household as having a particularly significant place in modern church life, specifically implicated in the church’s vocation of hearing and proclaiming the Word, pre-dates the Council by some years. Just as one of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century ecclesial responses to the perceived threat of secularisation in the West was the “promotion of the laity” as the “secular arm of the hierarchy”,²⁸ through, in particular, the lay organisation of Catholic Action,²⁹ so, too, the Christian family was

²⁵ Most influential in this are has been the work of Jack Dominian. For example, see his most recent book *Living Love. Restoring Faith in the Church* (Darton, Longman and Todd 2004), which includes two chapters on domestic church: chapters 21 & 28.

²⁶ It is not always clear that this necessarily refers to the couple with children still at home. The childless marriage, or the pre- or post- full-time parenting couple, or indeed the single parent living in separation or widowhood – all these seem, of necessity, to have some real relation to what is being spoken of in “domestic church”.

²⁷ On this, see also footnote 7 above.

²⁸ A central text in understanding the complex relations between the hierarchy and lay movements in the “secular” consciousness of the early twentieth-century is Pius X’s *Il Fermo Proposito* (1905). The urgency with which lay men and women are called to the task of *instaurare omnia in Christo* is clearly related to the organisational church’s anxiety about its place in the modern, secularised societies of the West.

²⁹ L Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action* (London 1935) gives an informative taste of this.

seen in these years as holding a vital position in the struggle for church identity and survival in a seemingly hostile world. In language powerfully resonant with the political and social turmoil of 1930s Europe, Pius XII wrote:

As long as the sacred flame of the Faith burns on the domestic hearth, and the parents forge and fashion the lives of their children in accordance with this Faith, youth will be ever ready to acknowledge the royal prerogatives of the Redeemer, and to oppose those who wish to exclude Him from society or wrongly to usurp His rights. . . . When churches are closed, when the Image of the Crucified is taken from the schools, the family remains the providential and, in a sense, impregnable refuge of Christian life.³⁰

So, in his first encyclical, in attempting to speak to a Europe living in the shadow of the rise of fascism and war about the role of the modern state, Pius XII ends up speaking into the domestic lives of the faithful, as the place of hope and the continuing transmission of faith, where the Kingdom is recognised and lived. The idea of the domestic church as an essential aspect to modern ecclesiological thinking and practice has already begun to emerge – and, with it, one of the major themes for any attempted theology of the domestic church: the interpenetration of centre and margins in ecclesiology, witnessed to by the “secular” or ordinary faithful living of baptism in the world.

This brings us to our first major observation about the domestic church as a properly theological theme: the reorientation of ecclesiology demanded by an emphasis on domestic church, requires that we centre our thinking about church precisely in those places which – organisationally – appear to be on the edges of the church. It is clear, both in the Vatican II texts and in subsequent papal teaching, that there is a particular potential of church life in the Christian family which is derived precisely from its being, as well as ‘church’, ‘the primary vital cell of society’³¹; indeed, according to the *Decree on the Laity*, it is as such a cell of human society that the household is to understand its mission as ‘a domestic sanctuary of the church.’³² From this human societal basis, the Council text goes on to describe the mission of the domestic church as characterised by hospitality, work for justice, charity, and the support of other families, young people and the elderly, growing out from the family’s participation in the liturgy and worship of the church.³³ Here is described, it seems to me, a real *traditio*, a baptismally empowered handling of holy things,

³⁰ Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus* (1939) 90, 91.

³¹ *AA* 11, See also *LG* 11, where marriage is spoken of as, firstly, the place where ‘new citizens of the human society are born’.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

which is a genuine worship of God, in keeping with the Council's understanding of Divine Revelation, the source, after all, of all Christian teaching:

The tradition which comes from the apostles makes progress in the church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words which are being passed on. This comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (Luke ii 19). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who, on succeeding to the office of bishop, have received the sure charism of truth.³⁴

Here is a day-to-day Christian teaching, which is rooted in the sacred liturgy, and the hierarchical life of the organisational church, whilst enlarging our sense of where the sanctuary and the voice of teaching is to be found, and contributing to that supposition of this paper concerning the baptismal character and the *cultus Dei*. This enlarging of vision is possible precisely because of a centring of ecclesiological consideration away from an organisational centre and onto the marginal, “edgy” centre of the ordinary domestic living of baptismal character.

This first and fundamental observation about the ecclesiological significance of the domestic church is the necessary starting point for understanding the increasingly prominent place given the term and notion in post-conciliar papal teaching. In particular, this baptismal-ecclesiological challenge to the (organisational) centre from the margins, has profound theological-pastoral implications for the activity of Christian teaching. Indeed, it is precisely this characteristic of the *ecclesia domestica* that has made it so central a theme for the post-conciliar consideration of evangelisation and catechesis in the church's public teaching.

So, then, it is informative that one of the first “official” references to the Christian family as “domestic church” after the second Vatican Council comes in Paul VI's great encyclical on the church's mission, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). Having described the various aspects of the evangelising mission of the church, in strict hierarchical order – Pope, bishops, priests, and religious – Paul VI arrives at his reflections of the lay task of evangelisation. This lay role is understood, in continuity with Vatican II, and with the pre-conciliar “promotion of laity”, in terms of *consecratio mundi* – bringing the world of the secular to Christ.³⁵ In this the family, specifically as “domestic church”, is seen as having a particularly important role. For Paul VI to describe the family household in this way as *ecclesia domestica* is to claim that ‘there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church.’ Most significantly for our

³⁴ *Dei Verbum* 8.

³⁵ *EN* 70.

thinking on Christian teaching and ecclesiology, Paul VI continues that: ‘the family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates.’³⁶ Once again, from its place at the end of the hierarchical structure, on the edge of the organisation and so thoroughly immersed in “the world”, the *ecclesia domestica* is discovered as a place of privileged transmission and mission. It appears as a vital place in that activity of Christian teaching which is evangelisation.

We see this pattern repeated in the writings and speeches of John Paul II. So, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) the family as domestic church is seen as having an essential role to play in evangelisation, a role which is explicitly related to its particular nature as *both* ‘the fundamental cell of society’ *and* ‘the first cell of the living ecclesial community.’³⁷ This is spelt out even more explicitly in a later document:

[The family] is . . . the bearer of the heritage of humanity itself, because through the family life is passed on [trado?] from generation to generation. . . . The family is not simply the object of the Church’s pastoral care; it is also one of the Church’s most effective agents of evangelisation.³⁸

This emphasis on the missionary role of the domestic church is nowhere clearer than in *Ecclesia in America*, where the theme all but ends with the exhortation:

I therefore invite all the Catholics of America to take an active part in the evangelising initiatives which the Holy Spirit is stirring in every part of this immense continent . . . In a special way, I invite Catholic families to be ‘domestic churches’ (*Lumen Gentium* 11), in which the Christian faith is lived and passed on [!] to the young as a treasure, and where all pray together. If they live up to the ideal which God places before them, Catholic homes will be true centres of evangelisation.³⁹

The domestic church is here seen as a vital, hope-filled place of mission and transmission – a privileged place of *traditio*.

In the parallel exhortation for the church in Europe⁴⁰, whose major focus is, again, evangelisation, we see a slightly different reading of the

³⁶ EN 71. We note here that one of the consistent tendencies in the papal texts we examine in this paper is their juxtaposition of “Church” and “family” or “domestic church”, as if they were separate entities to be compared, implying in some way that domestic church is *not* Church. This presents some of the complications of an ecclesiological perspective which takes the *ecclesia domestica* as its starting place – at least within the Catholic tradition. These tensions and complications are repeatedly felt in this argument, although space does not allow for any fuller or more explicit consideration of them here.

³⁷ *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) 80. See 80–85.

³⁸ *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) 46.

³⁹ *Ecclesia in America* (1999) 76.

⁴⁰ *Ecclesia in Europe* (2003)

missionary task of the domestic church, which is, none the less, a further reflection on the kind of *traditio* proper to it as that aspect of church which is baptism-in-ordinary. Here the faithful living of Christian households as domestic church is seen as a prophetic, and counter-cultural challenge to wider society: in providing a context for a true Christian discernment of committed Christian vocation for young people⁴¹ and, by challenging the prevailing understandings and practices of sexual relationship, marriage, family, and the transmission of life,⁴² the domestic church speaks the Word to a culture where it is increasingly silent. And it does so, by virtue of its “worldly churchiness”, in language formed and fashioned out of that culture, albeit transformed by the Word of God. Here, in the domestic church, where faith is lived and celebrated in the ordinariness of life, drawing from so much in common with our non-Christian neighbours – here, perhaps, the culture of life can find a sufficiently comprehensible language with which to speak into the “culture of death”.⁴³

The ways in which the *ecclesia domestica* has a particular vocation to the hearing and speaking of the Word which is *traditio*, is most clearly summed up in John Paul II’s exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981). Here the evangelising mission of the domestic church is held together with that other and complementary aspect of the ecclesial vocation to Christian teaching – catechesis, or the transmission of faith. Holding the domestic church closely to what is seen as a wider or more general ecclesiology, this text crucially centres church mission on the Word: family is seen as ‘a sharer in the life and mission of the Church, which listens to the Word of God with reverence and proclaims it confidently.’ In this way the ‘prophetic role’ of the household is characterised by ‘welcoming and announcing the word of God.’⁴⁴ It is in virtue of this mission and responsibility to receive and proclaim, to handle and hand on the revealed Word, that the family as domestic church is implicated in Christian teaching: ‘the little domestic church, like the greater church, needs to be constantly and intensely evangelised; hence its duty regarding permanent education in faith.’⁴⁵

Thus the domestic church, as an ecclesiological reality and, I would suggest, an ecclesiological *perspective*, has an especially important pedagogical aspect. It has a specific responsibility to the proclamation of the Word to, in, and from the society of which it is so much a part, as well as a responsibility, of a piece with this first, to the

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 40.

⁴² *Ibid.* 90–93.

⁴³ This idea of the family as domestic church prophetically witnessing to life is especially clear in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (2003) 52.

⁴⁴ *FC* 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

transmission of faith, the handing on of the Word, to those growing in faith in the church (typically, children and the young). With this responsibility to this particular apostolate of Christian teaching comes a need too for an on-going formation for that apostolate – what *Familiaris Consortio* calls the family’s “duty regarding permanent education in faith.” If the domestic church is to carry out faithfully the baptismal call to this *traditio* in ordinary, then what is to be handed on must be continually received. The question remains as to how, in practice, this is to happen.

What remains striking in all this is the importance of the “ordinariness” of the domestic church. It is its very embeddedness in “the world” that gives it the potential to be central to the “New Evangelisation” of diverse, pluralist societies, in which organised religion is greeted with suspicion, cynicism, or lack of interest. It is the daily sacramentality of its life as a Christian household “in ordinary” that enables it to be the most effective place of catechesis, a place of proper integration of life and speech, where the day-to-day living of baptism and prayer can provide an authentic (and so, in a particular way, authoritative) context for the vocabulary of Christian speech to be learned and understood. It is for this reason that *Christifideles Laici* employs the language of domestic church specifically in relation to the tasks of catechesis, and formation in Christian vocation.⁴⁶ The thing about domestic church is that it really isn’t very “churchy”; it reminds us that ecclesiology is patterned by the baptismal character, the handing on of holy things, the things of divine worship, which often look rather mundane and ordinary, but aren’t. Herein lies the domestic church’s importance for the much needed renewal of Christian teaching in the life and mission of the church. But here, too, we are presented with the inherent difficulty of such grand ecclesiological and pedagogical claims. For the domestic church to carry out its particular call to *traditio* it must be ordinary *and* extraordinary, speaking from within its own human societal identity and from beyond itself. For the stuff handled in that Christian teaching is the stuff of Divine Revelation – holy things, received from beyond our own ordinary experience, the Word heard and learnt.

Christian Teaching as the Vocation of the Domestic Church. Concluding Pastoral-Ecclesiological Observations on “Being Called to Become.”

I hope by now to have established the centrality of the domestic church to any effective discussion of Christian teaching today. Both

⁴⁶ *Christifideles Laici* (1988) 57–63, on the formation of the laity, with reference to the domestic church coming in para.62.

pastorally and theologically it emerges as a place of both special concern and need, and particular potential and importance. Implicit in this is a larger claim: that in order to most effectively and truly address what many have termed a “crisis” in Christian teaching, what is required is a re-orientation of ecclesiology away from organisational and managerial emphases of the institution towards the ordinary living of baptism, as characterised by the Christian household.

I have made clear that this ecclesiological contribution to the discussion of Christian teaching is pastorally motivated. It is also pastorally orientated, recognising its end not in a static presentation of an idea but in the engagement with the dynamic of the ecclesial living of the teaching vocation that has been described as ‘the ordinary handling of holy things’. As a final (and necessarily short) section to this paper, then, I want to set this sketched theology of the domestic church in its wider ecclesiological context, which is necessarily *eschatological* – to do with our final end in God. It is from this “big place” of the end things, that we get a new perspective on the very real and practical problems we are faced with here and now in the matter of Christian teaching.

It has been remarked above that one of the frustrations of working with the language of “domestic church” is that – certainly popularly and pastorally – it is used in a rather general and descriptive way. It becomes simply a pious metaphor for the Christian family. The account given of the term’s use in papal and conciliar texts has been an attempt to move beyond such simple description. But even here there is that danger of the *ecclesia domestica* being heard more as a tag, or marketing term, than anything more substantial.

We are moved beyond this by a keener awareness of the *vocational* sense in which the term is most often used. Something of this is indicated by the deliberate hesitancy of *Lumen Gentium* 11 – that phrase, ‘in what might be regarded as the domestic church’, – and is even clearer in the conditional sentence of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 11:

The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members and by family prayer, presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the church; if the whole family takes its part in the church’s liturgical worship; if, finally, it offers active hospitality, and practises justice and other good works. . . .⁴⁷

Similarly in Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1974) – the first “official” use of the language of domestic church after the Council as far as I can see – it is clear that the household’s being understood as such, is *dependent* on charity, liturgical participation

⁴⁷ *Op.cit.* Emphases are mine.

and, especially, a domestic life ordered by prayer.⁴⁸ It is in these ways that the proper worldly and ordinary identity of the household is held open to its own calling from outside itself, in Christ. These signs of life in the Spirit are also the visible links with the sacramental reality of the institutional church, and so become the basis upon which the household can, in truth, begin to become the domestic sanctuary of Christ's church. This sense of the domestic church as not what Christian families *are*, but rather what they are called to *become* is the consistent key in which the language of *ecclesia domestica* is composed in recent papal texts.⁴⁹ We need only remember the way in *Familiaris Consortio* typifies the ecclesiological mission of the household in terms of a receiving and announcing of the Word to realise that what is spoken of is a dynamic and demanding living of vocation, not simply a descriptive image.⁵⁰ Explicitly, for the *traditio* undertaken in the Christian household to be truly Christian teaching, it is 'in so far as the ministry of evangelisation and catechesis of the church of the home is rooted in and derived from the one mission of the Church and is ordained to the upbuilding of the Body of Christ.'⁵¹ But what becomes clear here is that for such a dynamic of ecclesiological vocation to work, a communion of intellect and language is required, grown from an ecclesial practice of *traditio* that enables all to receive what is given to each. A communicating, controversial living of church must be assumed.

The image of being *called into* life as domestic church, and the teaching functions this implies, returns me to those parental catechesis classes and the chilling sense of empty-handedness that seems to affect the church at the level of domestic living. For to remind people of their vocation, – the promises we make as parents at the baptism of our children, our commissioning in confirmation and marriage to witness to the Gospel, the baptismal ordaining to the handling of holy things in the ordinariness (and dullness!) of life – to *remind* lay men and women of this is not enough: the handling and handing on to others, of the things pertaining to the worship of God requires formation, teaching, and learning, as a continuous *culture* of apostolate. Such an observation shows up the folly of imagining that adult lay catechesis can be treated in terms of courses and programmes of the kind outlined by most diocesan pastoral plans.⁵²

⁴⁸ Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974) 52–54. Here formal prayer in common, especially the rosary and the Liturgy of the Hours, are seen as essential to family life 'in full measure the vocation and spirituality proper' to them.

⁴⁹ For examples not quoted see *Pastores Gregis*, 52; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 46.

⁵⁰ *FC* 21, as quoted above.

⁵¹ *FC* 53.

⁵² In saying this I am also aware of the growing number of effective and pastorally helpful groups that are springing up, especially in relation to the transmission of faith in the domestic church, as is testified to by a few of the respondents to *Listening 2004* – e.g. para. 85.

At the same time it opens up a much more frightening question: how is a *culture* of teaching and learning to be nurtured practically in the church, in ways that specifically enable households to be the places of *traditio* they are called to be, receiving what has been given, so as to handle it and hand it on?

However we respond to this, it is clear that the very eschatological nature of the ecclesiology of domestic church as orientated to *vocation* requires that the locus of the domestic church becomes, itself, the place of priority in the activity of Christian teaching today. Only then can we hear afresh the language of “Church teaching”, not in some objectified, nounal sense but as a verbal, doing reality of baptismal living at the heart of ecclesial life, which is the hearts of ordinary men and women, and structured by openness to what is beyond itself. The challenge for the vitality of the Church of the future is not, in fact, how to administer parishes with a growing shortage of clergy but, rather, how to nurture spiritually and equip intellectually the baptised for our vocation of *traditio*, carried out in ordinary and becoming-extraordinary households. Then we can learn, as a church together, the wisdom to live God’s future, whatever we discover it to be.

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