Spirituality

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Thirty experts in theology, social sciences and family life gathered for a symposium at the University of Notre Dame in mid-July to discuss ideas for enhancing the spirituality and vitality of Catholic families worldwide.

Titled "Exploring the Unique Role of Catholic Families in Growing the Faith," the symposium touched on issues such as: keeping children Catholic; bringing nontraditional families into the life of the parish; helping parents catechize their children; ministering to Catholics of all ethnic and racial backgrounds; and evangelizing through the family.

Another topic was helping Catholic families function as the "domestic church" and it was a theme that permeated the July 19-21 symposium.

That concept of "domestic church" was introduced by the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ("Lumen Gentium").

Not only are parents like pastors to their children, but also "the Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion," according to St. John Paul II, writing in his 1981 apostolic exhortation "Familiaris Consortio," on

the role of the Christian family in the world.

Several speakers indicated that since Vatican II (1962-65), the Catholic Church has not done much to develop that concept of "domestic church" and help parents understand and embrace their role of evangelizing and "being" church as well as attending church.

Social scientist Mark Gray, a senior research associate for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, cited an alarming picture of Catholic demographics in this country.

He noted that recent polls show that in the 1970s, over 70% of Catholics got married in the church; today it is less than 20%. Further, 68% of Catholic children receive all their religious education in the home, not in Catholic schools or CCD programs.

Theologian Joseph Atkinson of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington cited a presentation by Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles to the U.S. bishops' June meeting about young people and the church.

Barron reported that 50% of Catholics 30 years old and younger have left the church and that the median age of those leaving is 13. For every person who joins the church today, more than six are leaving.

Atkinson said that political and cultural forces are trying to move people away from orthodoxy and to destroy the family, and "our current approaches, whatever they are, manifestly are not working.

"One fundamental problem is that few people ... are willing to admit that in the West, at least, an authentic Christian faith ... that informs people's values as so true that one would be willing to die for that faith, has simply been eviscerated from our lives and our culture system."

To correct this situation, Atkinson said, we must recover an authentic theology of creation, acknowledging that we are created by God and are ecclesial persons who are fully alive only in the body of Christ. He added that we also must recover an authentic theology of baptism, which moves us into incorporation with that body of Christ.

Helen Alvare, a law professor at George Mason University and former consultor for the Pontifical Council for the Laity, specializes in the intersection of law, religion and culture. She told the symposium that the U.S. Supreme Court "articulates beautiful values but promotes terrible things," such as "inventing" a constitutional right to contraception and abortion and finding that marriage is not a special unity, but rather two people with individual ideas deciding what makes family.

Because of various cultural and economic factors, Alvare said, the language the Catholic Church is using about the family is incomprehensible to many people because it does not relate to families' ordinary experiences, and people have no idea what "domestic church" means.

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She proposed that the church needs to develop "new language" that touches on actual life experiences and demonstrates the many positive effects of church teachings on family: equality, dignity, happiness, freedom, economic success, and care for creation and the future. In turn these values would be a "gift" to all families and help the U.S. to become a true "melting pot" of all peoples, she said.

Family counselors Gregory and Liza Popcak, directors of the Pastoral Solutions Institute and organizers of the symposium, proposed a framework for helping people understand the family is an icon of the Trinity. Further, family life is liturgical by its very nature, and the everyday routine of family life is a way of growing in holiness.

Titled "Liturgy of Domestic Church Life," the Popcaks identified three "rites" of the liturgy of the "domestic church," all connected to the sacrament of baptism: the rite of relationship/attachment; the rite of rituals of connection; and the rite of reaching out.

The Popcaks announced that the symposium was launching the Peyton Institute for Domestic Church Life, named after Fr. Patrick Peyton, a Holy Cross priest and sainthood candidate who is known as the "rosary priest." That institute will focus on supporting "domestic church" life through activities including research, training and retreats. The Popcaks encouraged all the experts to share their ideas for this project.

The Peyton Institute's sponsors are Holy Cross Family Ministries and the Pastoral Solutions Institute, both of which co-sponsored the Notre Dame symposium. Notre

Dame Institute for Church Life and Our Sunday Visitor Institute also were sponsors.

Jason Shanks, president of the Our Sunday Visitor Institute, announced that Our Sunda Visitor was going to publish a book of the symposium's papers.

He also discussed the Institute's new focus on three specific initiatives: young adult reengagement, Hispanic outreach and Catholic parenting resources. He said these areas affect the church's future, and he invited all scholars and researchers to apply for Our Sunday Visitor grants to work on these topics.