

Matthew
Sarah
Christopher
Elizabeth
Abigail
Jacob
Noah



Families, did you know?

Love is calling your children

■ A unique mission

“I call you by your name” (Is. 45, 4)... Unique and irreplaceable, every child conceived in his mother’s womb – every single one of our children – has been desired by God, who called that child to life. Indeed, each and every one of us is loved by Love itself and called to fulfill a unique mission.

In God’s great plan – a plan of love and unity – each person has a role to play. That person and no other, at a precise moment in the history of humanity, will be able to fulfill this role by answering “yes” to God’s call. One might be given three months or four years to fulfill his mission, while another might have 13, 27, 46, 68, 89 or even 100 years to accomplish it.

God gives us freedom and embraces the risk inherent in this gift. Created in His image and likeness, we are free to accept or to reject His love; and hence free to accept or decline His mysterious invitation to share, after our death, His life and His joy in the eternal exchange of love that unites the three persons of the Blessed Trinity.

Truly, our whole life is a calling¹ – a call to love, serve and to give ourselves, as did Jesus. Each day brings new calls from God through other people, events or “good ideas” that the Holy Spirit whispers in our hearts.

■ Time is a treasure!

Day after day, hour after hour, wherever we live and work, Christ is waiting for us to be His helpers in ordinary life: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. “ (Rv 3, 20).



We are responsible as parents to nurture the budding vocations that God planted in the souls of our children.



All these days, months and years, all this time we are given is actually a treasure: the time to be born, the time to love, to learn, to play, to grow; the time to laugh, the time to cry; the time to listen, to talk, to forgive, to build. Even the time to die...

Time allows us to develop fully and become the person God had in mind when He gave us life. Therein lies our happiness and that of our children: doing God's will. And who would not want to be happy?

"It is necessary to learn to understand God's will, so that it may shape our own will. This is in order that we ourselves may desire what God desires, because we recognize that what God wants is the beautiful and the good... We must learn to share in the thinking and the will of Jesus Christ. It is then that we will be new people in whom a new world emerges."²



■ Choosing Christ

Baptism grants access to this new world. We already possess human life; through baptism, we now receive divine life! What incredible dignity: God comes to dwell in us with all His love and all His life-giving strength, His graces! Never again will we be alone in facing the challenges of life. From now on, we are children of God and children of the Church. In fact, our baptism is both an extraordinary gift and a challenging call. By making us Christians, that is to say women and men who walk in the footsteps of Christ, our baptism invites us to become saints and apostles – to imitate Christ our brother; to let Him be the sculptor who will chisel our lives according to His perfect design so our ideas, our feelings and our desires reflect His.

And the day comes when we must consciously make a choice: "He asks you to heed the call of Christ and his way of life, his commandment of love. (...) Love demands effort and a personal commitment to the will of God."³

For the disciple who acquires the habit of a daily and intimate contact with the Master of his life through prayer, who learns to trust his loving Father who wants his personal happiness, there comes a decisive moment when a more precise call is heard: "Come, follow me" (Mk 10, 21). If he responds, the call will guide his entire life since it is a vocational call: to marriage, the priesthood, consecrated life or apostolic celibacy. It is often through our preferences, our talents, our dreams or our desires that God makes us discover our vocation; by events too, or through someone else.

All of these vocations are complementary and mutually supportive. They flourish within the Church that Jesus founded before returning to the Father and to which all the baptized belong. To that Church which is His Body, Christ entrusts his dream of unity for all mankind: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17, 21).

Loving Christ also means loving His Body, the Church, the People of God called to proclaim the merciful love of the Father in union with he who St. Catherine of Siena affectionately called “the sweet Christ on earth”, the Pope. It was to St. Peter, his successors and all bishops who are in communion with

him, that Jesus entrusted his Church: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (. . .) whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16, 18-19).

Yes, everything starts in the family!

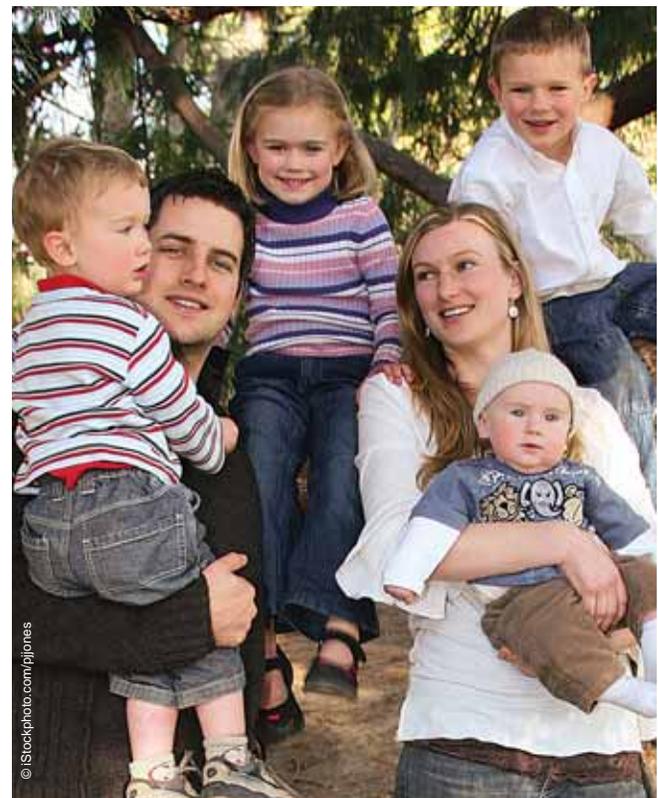
Hannah, Christine, Justin and Thomas are growing up today in a Christian family whose parents are aware of their awesome responsibility: leading to God these little treasures that He has entrusted to them. They will have to make them citizens of Heaven who will contribute, by their practical involvement in the Church and society, to the growth of the Kingdom of God in our world.

More than anything, parents want their children to be happy, and many wonder:

“How can we accompany them on the road to their complete fulfillment? How can we help them understand their eternal destiny? How can we inspire them to seek and discover their vocation and support them in answering God who is calling them?”

It is within the family – very gradually and in the course of daily life – that children and adolescents learn to know God and to trust Him. That is where they meet Jesus and welcome Him as a Friend. As they spend time with Him, they will come to understand that the big challenge for a child of God and a disciple of the King of the Universe is not only to avoid evil, but to do, with Him at their side, all the good they are called to do. Rest assured: Christ will call every single one of our children to a very personal vocation. Their answer will depend to a great extent on the openness of heart acquired in the family.

To center family life on Christ is to teach our children to give God first place in their lives, as Jesus taught us: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your



mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22, 37-39).

Blessed John Paul II said it best: “Parents will best help their children live their lives to the fullest if they teach them to make their whole lives a gift to God and to others. They need to respect their choices and encourage every vocation with joy, including religious or priestly. The family will play a fundamental role in the development, growth and final maturing of their vocation.”⁴

Since, we are responsible as parents to nurture the budding vocations that God planted in the souls of our children, here are a few suggestions:

■ Aiming at virtue

What parents would not want their children to become mature and responsible adults? Another hope dwells in the hearts of Christian parents: that their daughters

Going to Jesus as a family

In order to decide to follow Christ, we must love Him. To love Him, we must know Him. And to know Him, we need to spend time with Him. Where? How? He waits for us in prayer, in His Word, His forgiveness and in the Eucharist.

Prayer – Taking time regularly for short periods of prayer in order to talk to Jesus together, to thank Him for a meal, to share our concerns and our dreams, to entrust our friends to Him, to ask forgiveness for our quarrels, to praise Him for the beauty of a sunset, to ask for assistance, helps children to become aware of His constant presence. It is also important to learn to enjoy quiet moments – perhaps in Eucharistic adoration – where we are attentive to the promptings of the Spirit of Jesus and at other times to pray the rosary while meditating on the mysteries of the life of Jesus and Mary, our models.

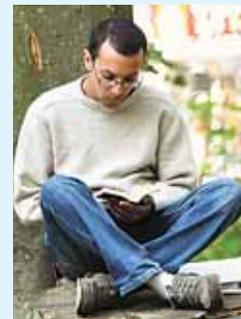
Word – By sending us His Son, God our Father has told us everything. Jesus is His Word and he gives us his Good News in the Gospel. Reading and meditating on biblical texts with our children and teens helps them understand that the Word of God speaks to each and every one of us. His Word guides us, challenges us, comforts us, reassures us. *Lectio divina* is a particularly popular method; it consists in reading slowly a passage from the Bible (*lectio*), in reflecting on it, and letting the Holy Spirit guide us (*meditatio*), in entering into dialogue with God and being transformed (*oratio*), and finally in resting peacefully in God (*contemplatio*). What a gift!

Forgiveness – Recognizing our faults and wanting to improve: these are two extremely positive attitudes that make family life more enjoyable. For Christians who are aiming at nothing less than holiness, Christ has provided a sacrament made to measure: Reconciliation. Parents who regularly seek out this sacrament and who encourage their children to follow their example, do them a huge favour; not only will they experience the tenderness and mercy of the Lord, but also His desire to fill them with supernatural strength to face the struggles of their daily lives.

Eucharist – During Mass, children and parents receive divine energy that helps them to love the way God loves, since Jesus gives Himself as food in the Eucharist. Truly present in the Host that we eat, He comes to transform us to make us other Christs, ready to serve with Him at home, at school, at work, in our leisure time and our social and political commitments. That is why it is so essential for the baptized to participate faithfully at church on Sunday and, if possible, to make occasional visits to worship Jesus, who is always waiting for us in the tabernacle, to thank Him and ask for His help.



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and sons respond positively to their vocational call. For this reason, they will seek to develop in them these specific human virtues: gratitude, generosity, honesty, humility, detachment, obedience, sincerity, optimism and a spirit of service. Parents know that if their children are to discern their vocations and respond generously, they must also learn to be open to the Spirit of Jesus in prayer. Other virtues will help them remain faithful to their vocation: patience, perseverance, joy, understanding, loyalty, righteousness, selflessness, fortitude and self-control. From their early years, they will be able to learn what it means to live a chaste life. They will learn from experience that they need to rely on God's grace to ensure that their choices and decisions are consistent with their faith.

■ Explaining our choices

Sooner or later our children will understand that Christians cannot live exactly like those who do not know Christ. Of course, they live in the world as regular citizens, yet they have a *super-natural* perspective. Their lifestyle takes its inspiration from the way Jesus thought and acted. Before making important decisions, they pray to Him who is "the way, and the truth, and the life." (Jn 14, 6). Their trust in Him gives them the



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freedom of the children of God; they know they are in good hands because "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom 8, 28) – even difficulties, which can be offered to God, united to the sufferings of Christ. Faced with a culture often resistant to the Gospel, our children will be proud to be Christians if they understand how they are privileged to be sisters and brothers of Christ.

■ Participating in the life of the Church

By participating in the life of the Church, where Christ truly lives, our children will learn to recognize His voice calling them to one or another of the Christian vocations. The living witness of men and women who have joyfully answered "yes" to Christ's calling will attract

"From a childhood in a warm Christian home, rich in constant prayer, children and youth learn to regard their existence as a call to generosity and self-giving."

– Blessed John Paul II, May 23, 1994, Rome

and draw our teenagers and help them to grow in their desire to follow Him. If they also make friends who share their beliefs and values, either in the parish, a spiritual or humanitarian movement, or a new community, it will encourage them to remain faithful to Christ. Rejecting the world is not an option, obviously; rather, the goal is to become stronger – to go against the tide of the prevailing mentality and fashion, and to witness with courage.

■ Continuous formation

As in any human endeavour, growth in the Faith benefits from ongoing formation and support. Finding a spiritual guide, studying the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, reading the encyclicals and apostolic exhortations of the Popes, joining a Bible study group, are all solid ways of forming one's conscience and intellect in order to become – or remain – a good apostle, faithful to one's vocation.

Lord, what would you have me do?

For the UN, 2011 will have been an International Year of Youth: a time to encourage the world to create opportunities for youth to become more involved in the evolution of society.

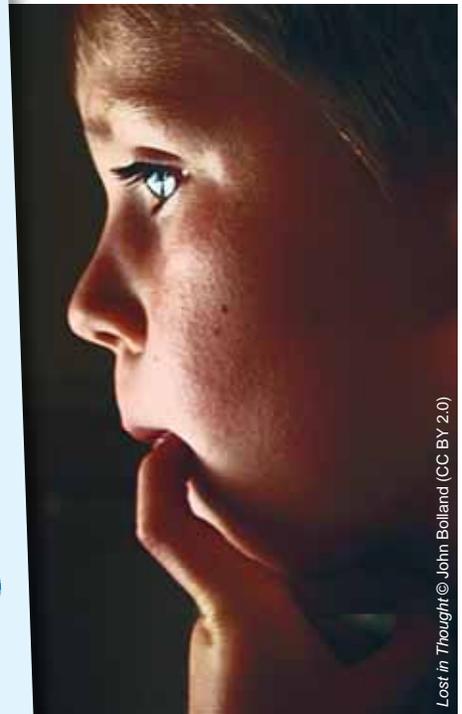
This parallels the words of a great friend of youth, Blessed Pope John Paul II: "Courage, young people, Christ is calling you and the world awaits you! Remem-

ber that the kingdom of God needs your generous and total consecration."⁵

This consecration is realized through a vocation, since every vocation is a gift of self to God in response to His love. It is also the gift of self to others because God sends us toward them while giving us the grace to do what He asks of us. Therefore, every vocation has a missionary dimension. Each and every one of us is



Tell me,
Jesus,
what is
my mission?



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called to be a missionary – some abroad, but mostly in our own country: in our family, in our cultural and social environments.

Having vanquished death, the risen Christ met with His disciples on a mountain in Galilee. It is there, shortly before returning to His Father, that he entrusted them with the task of continuing His mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mt 28, 19-20).

■ A new evangelization

Today it is our turn to lead the members of our families, our friends and colleagues – one by one – to a powerful encounter, both personal and collective, with Jesus, so that He can touch them and heal them; so that they may discover that He is the only one capable of meeting the highest aspirations of their hearts, He who loves them so much and knows their needs better than anyone; and so that they choose to walk with Christ, light and strength for their life.

This is obviously a major challenge in the context of a society that is de-Christianized, secular and relativistic, where a new form of paganism is rampant. “The big problem for the West is forgetfulness of God: it is an oversight that is spreading”, says Pope Benedict XVI, calling the faithful to “proclaim God in a credible and appropriate way”. And he also lets out a cry from the heart: “Dear young people, let yourself be completely conquered by Christ!”⁶

At the hour of this new evangelization, parents and children are called – like all the baptized – to be witnesses to hope; to follow in the steps of St. Paul, the courageous apostle of whom it was said that “the only thing he was afraid of was offending God; anything else meant little to him. For that reason, the only thing he wanted was to be faithful to his Lord and make Him known to everyone.”⁷

“Faith in the resurrection of the dead and hope in eternal life open our eyes to the ultimate meaning of our existence: God created men and women for resurrection and life, and this truth gives an authentic and definitive meaning to human history, to the personal and social lives of men and women, to culture, politics and the economy. Without the light of faith, the entire universe finishes shut within a tomb devoid of any future, any hope.”

– Benedict XVI, Message of Lent 2011



■ The harvest is plentiful

Attentive to the promptings of the Spirit of Jesus, joyful, daring, solid and faithful to the doctrine of the Church, today’s apostles have experienced God’s mercy and desire more than anything to announce it around them. They unashamedly spread the good news that Jesus is alive, that He is at work in their lives and gives it its meaning. They know that without the testimony of a life consistent with the Gospel, their words will have no impact.

In their heart resounds again and again the call of Jesus: “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Lk 10, 2). So they constantly pray as couples, as families, as parishes, as communities, that the youth of the third millennium be open to God’s designs for them.

“Do not be afraid of the radical nature of his requests, advises the Blessed John Paul II, because Jesus, who loved us first, is ready to give whatever He asks. If He asks a lot of you, it is because you can give a lot.”⁸



Therefore, God hopes that each baptized person will answer “yes” to His call to marriage, the priesthood, consecrated life or apostolic celibacy. All of these vocations are paths to sanctity: particular ways to radiate God’s love. The only way to be consistently faithful to them, despite our shortcomings and weaknesses, is to rely on the grace of God.

■ Marriage

Marriage is a very special friendship: an alliance, a commitment, and a contract – a contract with legal aspects that define the mutual rights and responsibilities of the spouses. Not only is this friendship permanent and exclusive, it is also between a man and a woman. It is a celebration of similarities and differences, of unity in diversity and of the complementarity of the sexes. The anatomy of our bodies reveals that man and woman are made for each other. Thus, God designed married love in such a way that men become husbands and women become wives.

Among Christians, marriage is a sacred reality, a “sacrament,” an effective sign of the love and faithfulness of God who engages with the couple in the natural union of marriage to support them in their joys and trials.

It is also the beginning of a family, the basic unit of society and of the Christian community (a “domestic church”). Marriage is also a form of special friendship from yet another angle: it is oriented toward the procreation and education of new children.

A community of life and love, “conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God”

– 2nd letter of St. Paul the Apostle to Timothy, 1, 7-8

and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*.”⁹

Marriage is a divine call by which a man and a woman pledge themselves to one another for life. This is an opportunity to experience the beauty of human love, a love that reflects God’s love¹⁰, knowing that to love is not always a matter of feelings, but is also a decision to develop the art of “patching things up” and of forgiveness.

■ The ministerial priesthood

The day before he died on the cross, Jesus found a way to stay with us until the end of time. To His apostles gathered for the meal, He gave His Body to eat and His Blood to drink, and then He commanded them: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Since that time, the men called to the priesthood by Christ make the loving sacrifice of the Cross actually present on the altar every day. At Mass, we can all receive Christ and come away with Him to serve and love our sisters and brothers in humanity.

The unique mission entrusted to the priest - an instrument of God’s tenderness and spiritual father to the family of the Church – goes beyond this great mystery since he is also called to forgive our lack of love. Today, the priest is invited to “return to the confessional as a place in which to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also as a place in which ‘to dwell’ more often, so that the faithful may find compassion, advice and comfort, feel that they are loved and understood by God and experience the presence of Divine Mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist.”¹¹

By receiving the sacrament of Orders, the priest gives himself entirely to God and is entrusted with the threefold office of teaching, sanctifying and governing. Like the Good Shepherd, he is sent to guide the People of God and to build unity. The Holy Spirit makes him another Christ that will bring God to the world through his fidelity to the Gospel and his pastoral charity.

“The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter

between man and God. The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life”¹²; to teach silence to the laity so that they may hear within themselves the voice of God; and to give them the training they need to transform the professional, social, economic, cultural and political life from the inside,



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through their daily work, by bringing to it Christ and His way of life. Permanent deacons are there to support him in this task. In the Latin (Roman) Rite of the Catholic Church, ordinarily only men who have first committed themselves to the celibate life can be admitted to priesthood. In the Oriental Catholic Churches married men may be ordained.

■ Consecrated Life

To follow and imitate Christ more closely and to be a sign announcing the glory of the world to come, some people respond to the radical call to consecrated life. They live a solitary life, or a communal one. Thus, guided by the Holy Spirit, they become hermits or consecrated virgins, opt for active or contemplative religious life, or join a secular institute.

Their lives remind us that Christ is truly risen and that he awaits us all at the end of our earthly sojourn.

Lord Jesus, increase my desire to know you and to love you, and allow me to serve my sisters and brothers in humanity with you by my side.

This is why they have a special calling for missionary work, whether in their own country or in a foreign mission, to tell the world that happiness, justice and peace cannot be found outside of the spirit of the Beatitudes. In this way, they truly are spiritual mothers or fathers to all the children of God they encounter.

Devoted entirely to God, who they love above all, those women and men commit themselves to living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. “The evangelical counsels, as they have always been understood by the Church, may in this day and age appear as *madness* to many, who are unable to understand *the wisdom of the things of God*. It is madness, indeed, but it is a *joyous madness of love*. (...) The evangelical counsels, when lived joyously, bring us to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ crucified. For all consecrated people, they not only uplift and encourage, but also constitute a living and compelling ideal, allowing them to overcome hardships, sorrows and frustrations.”¹³

■ Apostolic celibacy

While *some lay people* are called to a *ministry* by their bishop for a particular mission in the Church, *all laity* receive from Christ himself, at the time of their baptism and confirmation, a call to the *apostolate*. Today, faced with the growing secularization of society, the lay apostolate is becoming increasingly



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urgent. More than ever, at this time of new evangelization, it is a responsibility and a right for all of us, members of the Church.

Lay people really find themselves on the front lines of the spiritual battle that rages in a soulless world searching for meaning. Some of them, men as well as women, hear Christ's call to give themselves to Him totally in the midst of the world. God calls them to renounce marriage and to give themselves, body and soul, to the urgent task of bringing their brothers and sisters to conversion and spiritual progress. Some will join a society of apostolic life or a personal prelature.

■ Our hope

Whatever the vocation to which our children are called, let us remember to pass on to them these words of wisdom from brother Jean-Pierre, the last survivor of the 1996 Tibhirine massacre, during which seven monks suffered martyrdom: "Life is but a passage, it ends one way or another. After, you meet the Lord."¹⁴ This is our hope – one we must bring to a world that awaits it without knowing it.

1 Jacques Philippe, *Called to Life*, Scepter Publishers, 2008.

2 Benedict XVI, Homily on the occasion of the closing of the Pauline Year, June 28, 2009.

3 Blessed John Paul II, October 1, 1979, Boston (USA). All quotes from Pope John Paul II included in this text are taken from the book *La vocation expliquée par le Pape*, Collection du Laurier, 1994.

4 Blessed John Paul II, Campo Grande (Brazil), October 7, 1991.

5 Blessed John Paul II, Rome, April 16, 1989.

6 Benedict XVI, Sulmona Cathedral, July 3, 2010.

7 Liturgy of the Hours, Second Reading : St. John Chrysostome, 2nd Homily on the Praises of St. Paul.

8 Blessed John Paul II, Rome, September 8, 1992.

9 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1643.

10 Inspired by the publication *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, a pastoral document of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Australia, adapted for Canada by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family, 2008.

11 Benedict XVI, Speech to the Apostolic Penitentiary during the Year of the Priesthood, March 11, 2010.

12 Benedict XVI, Meeting with the Polish clergy, Warsaw, May 25, 2006.

13 Blessed John Paul II, Florianopolis (Brazil), October 18, 1991.

14 *Le dernier moine de Tibhirine témoigne (The Last Monk of Tibhirine Speaks)*, Figaro Magazine, February 6, 2011, on the occasion of the presentation of the Palme d'Or to the film "Of Men and Gods", in Cannes.

Giving this more thought

Why not set aside a little bit of time to deepen your knowledge of the teachings of the Catholic Church and get a new appreciation for their beauty? Here are some questions to start an exchange with your spouse, friends or fellow parishioners:

- To be a Christian is first and foremost to walk in the footsteps of Christ. This means to imitate Him in every circumstance of my life. Even to the point of giving my life, like He did. What steps can we take to help our children understand this?
- Do our children know that God has a plan for their lives and longs for a personal relationship with them? Do we meet with Jesus as a family? Why? How could we give Him more space in our family life?
- What virtues do we seek to develop in our children to make them men and women mindful of God and of their neighbour? What means do we use to achieve this?
- God places in the soul of each child the seed of a vocation. What do we do to enable it to flourish? Do our children know that Christ can call them not only to marriage, but also to the priesthood, to consecrated life or apostolic celibacy? How can we make them aware of these vocational callings and help them discern their own? As parents, are we open to any vocation that the Lord would send our children?
- To be healthy, the body needs food, exercise and rest each day. Do our children know their soul needs the same care daily? Do we teach them to take time off to talk with Jesus, to hear his Word, and to attend Mass where they can eat the Bread of Life?
- Do we take time, as a family, to discuss the reasons behind our choices and decisions, especially when they are different from those of other families who do not know Jesus? Do our children learn to stay consistent with their faith and deeper values in their actions every day? How? Do they know what true freedom is, or do they think that being free is to do anything they want? How can we make them understand that to be truly free is to choose truth?
- As baptized Christians, we are all missionaries. Yet very few of us are called to evangelize foreign countries. For the most part, we will remain in our country, within our family, within our social and professional networks. It is precisely there that we will be able to offer members of our families, friends and colleagues, the friendship of Christ and His doctrine of love. Do we take this seriously? How can we meet this challenge?
- Do our children meet with friends who share their faith and values? How could this be beneficial to them? Which groups of young Catholics could they join?
- Do we put our children in contact with men and women who are true witnesses of Christ and of His gospel? Do we encourage our children to be involved in initiatives which have a positive impact on society? If we are not already doing this, how can we do it?
- The Church is calling all the baptized to join the new evangelization. Do I understand that I am called as well? What can I do so that my children become aware of this calling and become witnesses to hope?
- Am I able to answer the questions and objections of my children and friends on matters of faith? Or is my knowledge still at the kindergarten level in that regard? Could my parish, my diocese, a church movement or a new community help me to receive ongoing formation to better know and love Christ and his Church?



**Catholic Organization
for Life and Family**

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