

## THEOLOGY OF DOMESTIC CHURCH AND SACRAMENTALITY

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*La Faculté de Théologie de Leuven demande chaque année aux étudiants d'écrire un travail allant de 30 à 45 pages. C'est dans cette perspective que je partage en quelques pages le résumé de mon Travail .*

The term “domestic church” is not a new concept as some people can think. The term has a rich tradition in early Church and in Vatican II and post- Vatican theology. In the Acts of the Apostles the writer shows that the early Christians have two kinds of assemblies where they could meet and share bread. The first was in the temple and the second was at home. Acts 2, 46: *“With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple, and breaking bread in private houses (kat'oikon)”* and Act5, 42: *“And every day they went steadily on with their teaching in the temple and in the private houses, telling the good news of Jesus the Messiah”*<sup>1</sup>

It seems to us that the houses and the temple were the most natural places for the early Christians to fulfil their mission and to find their identity. This might be the starting point of domestic church according to our understanding, since the term “kat oikon” refers to house’s activities in its primary sense. However, some theologians and scholars trace the origin of domestic church in the Pauline epistles such as in Rom 16, 3-5: *“Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila (...) Greet also the congregation at their house”*. And in 2Tim4, 19: *“Greetings to Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus”*. In the light of the Saint Paul’s writings we find the expression “kat'oikon ekklesia”, meaning the church of the home. The expression is mostly mentioned in the end of his letter to Romans where he writes: *“Greetings also from Gaius, my host and host of whole congregation”* (see Rom.16: 5). These verses suppose that the religious activities start at home before being in the public place where they are institutionalized.

The expression “kat oikon ekklesia” means an activity which is related to church but performed at home. These passages constitute the backbone of the theology of domestic church. However, some scholars go back to the patristic period and try to find within the tradition of Church whether or not the concept of domestic church was present in the writings of the fathers of the Church. The theologians and scholars have quoted some fathers of the Church who have written or said something on domestic church among which mention should be put on John Chritstostom, Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nazianzus. It is important to know how the term of domestic church was used by the fathers of the Church. The “kat oikon ekklesi” or “ecclesia domestica” was implicitly used by the fathers of church in their writings. In his homely on the letter of St. Paul to Ephesians, John Chrisostom states that: *“if we regulate our households... we will also be fit to oversee the Church, for indeed the household is a little church. Therefore it is possible for us to surpass all other in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives”*. In the same order of idea, Augustine writes: *“Take my place in your families. Everyone who is head of a house must exercise the Episcopal office and look after the faith of his people”*. John Chrisostom goes up by saying *“let the house be a church, consisting of men and women... for where two; He said, are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we find in the description of both St. Augustine and J. Chritstostom, certain features of the Church such as, the hospitality, witness of the faith, the presence of the Christ, the mission to proclaim the good news of Christ, and the one given to parents for the education of their children. The Christian families

<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible, ed., ^eds., (1993; reprint, Catholic edition: The new revised stard version).

<sup>2</sup> Bourg, 10.

have to exercise their role as the ministers of the Church first all in their families and then in the Church.

Nowadays the concept has received significant place among theologians both catholic and no catholic but unknown among Christian families. Being used within catholic tradition, the concept of domestic church found its echoes in Vatican council II mainly in dogmatic constitution on the Church and in the post conciliar theology. This idea, of course allows Christian families to fulfil their character as people of God without being a true church understood in juridical sense. It also suggests that the Christian family serves as a basic unit of the Church and forms the starting point of the Church. Furthermore, this idea shows that all believers share responsibilities for the church's mission by virtue of their baptism.

The idea of people of God had led to the idea of local church where the Christian family immerses itself in the world as leaven and servant. Indeed, F. Bourgeois notices that after Vatican II, the term "domestic church" and its influence was relatively uncommon, in the sense that few texts were written on it; however, it is with John Paul II that it received a remarkable revival; and the concept appeared often in the speeches of the pontiff and in his weekly audience and furthermore it found an echo among the American and African bishops. The latter predicated the Church as God's family built on the model the model of their societies. The concept of domestic remains theologically sophisticated in the sense that it is always seen in a symbolic way rather than in its strict meaning and there is little room in theology for it, that is to say, few writings are found on the subject and the ones we found are treated in relationship with marriage.

In our understanding, we find the first image of the family as domestic church in the image of the Trinity, where the Father, Son and Holy live harmonically. The second image of domestic church leads to the holy family of Nazareth, known as the best school of religious virtues. Theologically speaking, the domestic church is an ideal family which is built on the second model. Being a small church or domestic church, family needs to be the place where Christians meet God through and by everyday activities. In this perspective Normand Provencher states : *"Sans être pourtant une Eglise locale ou particulière, la famille chrétienne est une véritable cellule d'Eglise, parce que nous retrouvons en elle plusieurs réalités qui sont essentielles à la constitution même de l'Eglise entière : la présence du christ, la mission d'évangélisation, la vie de prière et de charité. Elle représente en quelque sorte une unité fondamentale de l'Eglise, et elle réalise sa présence concrète dans un milieu déterminé. »*<sup>3</sup>

The concept presupposes that religious activities are not in a closed place or on a particular day of the week; rather a whole live wherever a Christian has to be. This idea suggests that by daily life Christian family is the expression of the church and the church in miniature.

The experience shows that there are still problems surrounding the idea of the domestic church in its juridical language as well as in its symbolic language namely, in its relationship with the Church's hierarchy, concerning evangelisation discernment, the use of sacraments, and the reduction of religious practices and Church activities to a close circle. That is why the domestic church is a call for personal duties as far as religious activities are concerned. This means that there need to have in the Church a private sphere which in principle and nature cannot be regimented and fulfilled by the Church as society.

The Christian family's way of living, that is to say, the way Christ is manifested in their daily life can be seen as sacrament in the primordial sense of the term. The result of the conceptual understanding of sacrament let us to state that sacraments as signs or symbols of God's grace are inseparable from the life of the Christians.

The Christian family as domestic church can manifest Christ's presence in different ways: in religious activities, that is to say, in the way the family fulfils the Christian obligations and the way the family that family is a school of virtues where other people can learn

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<sup>3</sup> Provencher: 33.

from it.

The understanding of the domestic church as sacrament by F. Bourg does not convince us in our way of seeing the sacraments. It appears to us F. Bourg reduces the meaning of sacraments in simplistic way of living. We know that the sacramentality is the most characteristic of the domestic church. Since, without being a sign of God's presence in the world, the domestic church becomes a concept without meaning but F. Bourg's way of dealing with this characteristic of domestic is quite simple. It is important to notice that domestic church receives the sacramental character because it is linked to the Church. This character is found outside itself, that is to say, it is God's grace that is at work in whole community that gives this grace to Christian family.

In fact, F. Bourg defends the idea according to which the understanding of the family as domestic church requires understanding the Church properly. The author does not make a difference between domestic church and universal Church. For her, the values that define Christian life are the same that define the universal Church. Furthermore she maintains the idea that the structure is not the key of Christian identity because some theologians defend the idea that family has not a special structure as the Church does.

It seems to us that the notion of domestic church is the notion which emphasises on the fact that Christian family is a sacrament, a sign of Christ in the world in its day to day life. Moreover, the concept of domestic church serves as symbol of the wider Church community. It allows all Christian families to fulfil their prophetic, priestly and royal mission. The concept of the domestic enables us to confirm that Christian life is sacred; it enables us to recognise that the Christian family is an active agent of Church rather than a mere passive recipient. This notion of domestic church is recognition of Jesus' promise to be present wherever two or three are gathered in his name. The idea of domestic Church suggests also that religious activities are not confined to a sanctuary or a particular day of the week; rather, it is a daily activity.

We are aware by the fact that if the Christian family should become a true domestic church, it needs to belong to the Church and nourished by the Church teaching. In our point of view we would suggest the complementarities, that is to say, there should not be conflict between Christian family and the Church as it is nowadays in some parts of the world. If the family and the Church are not in conflict but complementary then both will deserve the name of sacrament. Moreover, to consider how the concept of domestic church can be more significant, we need to consider how the Christian families can serve as resources for the entire Church, meaning that the Christian family who has become more deeply aware of the significance of its vocation as domestic church may be more willing to be available for service in the local Church and wider community. We are convinced that the concept of domestic church will help the Church's leaders to recognise that family is an active agent of the Church ministries; and allow us to speak of the spirituality that is proper to family life.