

# Family Before Apostolate

*Pro-Life Activism Begins at Home*

BY PETE VERE AND JACQUELINE RAPP

Along with Jacqueline, her husband, Keith, and Fr. Phil, a priest who happened to be one of our mutual friends from canon law school, I found myself savouring the country buffet. Months had passed since the four of us had last gathered for some fun and fellowship. The conversation was not as heavy as what some might expect from three canonists and a catechist. From “The Lumberjack Games” and smoked barbeque to Belgian Trappist ale and the subtlety with which “The Wiggles” promotes a Catholic worldview, we all bantered back and forth, laughing and arguing between mouthfuls of country fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and boiled turnip greens.

Suddenly, Pachabel’s “Canon” interrupted the evening’s festivities. Recognizing the number, I grabbed my cell phone and excused myself from the conversation at our dinner table. The caller on the other end was well known in Catholic circles. Sounding distraught, “John” shared how spouse and children were rebelling against the long hours spent away from home. It seems that he spent most of this time on the circuit, promoting a pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-family Catholic apostolate among the laity.

Apparently, the marital difficulties had been brewing over the past year. John had intended to deal with the problem once the next major conference was over. Yet

things had boiled over the previous night when, for the first time in the couple’s marriage, his spouse uttered a word previously unspoken between them: divorce.

Obviously, I was concerned and didn’t want to leave John hanging. I mentioned that I was eating dinner with two

other canon lawyers and a catechist; the four of us would discuss the situation and I would call back with any advice we thought might be helpful.

This was not an isolated incident. That month alone, between the four of us, we had encountered four or five other faithful Catholic couples who were suffering serious marital strife. In each case one spouse had threatened separation or divorce.

As tribunal canonists and pro-family advocates,

both Pete and I encounter hundreds of broken or damaged marriages each year. As married laypersons, we also experience on a daily basis the difficulties of balancing apostolic work with our respective family obligations. Simply put, faithful Catholics are not immune from marital strife. Nor are we immune from marital breakdown just because we happen to find ourselves at the forefront of the pro-marriage and pro-family movement.

In fact, the opposite is true. As Our Lord teaches in the Gospels, “The harvest is bountiful but the workers are few.” It is not unusual for the few to find themselves overworked.



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Given the persecution of marriage and family within modern society, we can become so committed to combating the culture of death that we lose sight of our own marriages and families. This is one of the reasons the Roman Church has traditionally required her clergy to remain celibate.

Now, this is not to say that the married state is incompatible with ministry or apostolate. Personally, having a family has helped me become more compassionate, while at the same time remaining faithful to the Church's teaching in my work as a lay canonist. Being married and having children often opens us to graces and personal discoveries not previously experienced. As lay judges, both Pete and I understand certain nuances of marriage and family life that can easily be overlooked by our peers in the world of canon law who are celibate priests.

In contrast, as married laity we cannot devote the same time and effort to spreading the Gospel as that devoted by our ordained peers. Spouses have needs, as do children. Each of us undertakes these responsibilities toward our respective spouse and future children when we get married. The legitimate needs of spouse and children must come before the needs of our apostolic work.

Unfortunately, it is too easy to let ministry invade one's private life. There is always one more soul in need of hearing the Gospel, one more wounded individual in need of comfort, and one more baby in need of rescue from the abortionist's scalpel. When confronted on a daily basis with such heart-wrenching scenarios, laypersons heavily involved in apostolic endeavours can forget those whom God has placed most in need of their attention: their families. We often attend to the needs of the stranger while neglecting those of spouse and children. As Bl. Teresa of Calcutta once noted, "We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty."

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This potential problem is compounded when immersing oneself in lay apostolate also becomes a means for avoiding the interpersonal relationships of family. In the name of “doing God's work,” some lay apostles avoid facing unresolved conflict in the home. Apostolate can become primarily a means for feeling good about oneself, rather than a means for serving God. After all, “Thank you for helping me through the death of my mother” and “You are such a wonderful witness for the Gospel of Life” is easier on the ego (and the ears) than “Honey, please pick up after yourself,” or “I wish you would spend more time at home with the kids and me.” Being pro-marriage and pro-family becomes more difficult to put into practice when the children are screaming and the spouse is nagging about dirty dishes.

As a personal aside, I married my wife, Sonya, around the same time that I graduated from St. Paul University in Ottawa with a licentiate in canon law. After nearly six years of both marriage and canonical ministry, I have learned that my wife is not one of my readers. She is more impressed when I remember to take out the trash than when I recall fine points of canon law.

Similarly, I'm sure that Keith would rather listen to Jacqueline say “I love you” than hear her pontificate on the minutiae of Pope John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*. In short, our spouses remind each of us that we must practice what we preach as married lay canonists.


When apostolate calls, it is easy to let our family life fall by the wayside. It is easy to let our apostolate become the source of our identity, when as a married Catholic, “who we are” should be dictated by the sort of spouse and parent we are. In short, being a pro-life, pro-marriage, and pro-family Catholic begins at home.

It begins with one's own life, one's own marriage, and one's own family. After all, we become one flesh with our spouse, not our apostolic work.

Finances are another issue. A married layperson is obliged to provide spouse and children with the necessities of life. As a married canonist, I quickly learned that financial problems are one of the major causes of marital breakdown. I also learned that while the Church often talks about being open to children in marriage and educating them in Catholic schools, the Church seldom financially compensates her married lay employees accordingly. Sometimes, feelings of bitterness arise because of this situation. Yet as tough as the decision may be, being a pro-life and pro-family Catholic sometimes means one must abandon an outside apostolate to find a secular job as the family expands. After all, pro-life leaflets may save children in the womb, but they will neither feed nor clothe the baby after birth.

In the end, being a pro-marriage and pro-family Catholic means putting our marriages and families first. Laypersons who are active in Catholic apostolate must learn to say “no” when their apostolate deprives them from spending time with their spouse and family, for this is their primary responsibility. We must remember that promoting strong marriages and families begins at home.

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