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Domesticity and Disorder

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“Like the sun rising in the Lord’s heavens, the beauty of a virtuous wife is the radiance of her home.” Sirach 26:16

As my husband and I traveled across the United States to spend Christmas with his family in Montana this year, I had the privilege of being a guest in several homes full of life and love.

Families welcomed us with warm, home-cooked meals, entertained us with stories or games, invited us to share in their traditions, and delighted in our presence as guests. While these homes are the norm in my experience, I do realize that they are a rare gift. The holidays can be a poignant reminder of the vulnerability and the work that it takes to welcome another into our home (or even to be a guest in the home of another). Whether it is a result of the vulnerability or the work required, it certainly seems to be the case that more often people invite friends out to an event rather than into their own homes for a casual dinner or visit. As my husband and I began to think about the kind of home we want to cultivate together, we asked ourselves exactly how to prepare our home in order to share our life with others. What is necessary in order to infuse a home with life and love?

My childhood home was very much a lived-in place, it was ordered around family meals and time spent playing or working—mostly outside. Each thing in our home had its own place, but was more often found out and about in use. The busyness of life fostered an accumulation of things: school papers, toys, books, half-completed projects, puzzles or games out in the open. Cleaning and chores were kicked into high gear when a guest was invited to the house. Prior to arrival, everything was returned to its rightful place (or at least in a room out of sight) and surfaces were immaculately polished. As a child I could appreciate the beauty of a clean room and recognize that somehow this was an important way of welcoming someone into our home.

As I have grown older, I see how much more went into making a house a home: traditions, forms of entertainment, preparation of food, laundry, and artwork just to name a few.

I am constantly reminded in my work with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that a properly prepared environment is what makes real work, life and prayer possible. An environment that is improperly prepared always brings with it some kind of breakdown in work, life, and prayer while an environment that has been properly prepared creates space for all of these. It is the

responsibility of the Catechist to prepare the materials needed for work and to foresee the needs of the children so that their work can be fruitful. There is a domestic parallel to this: a similar “preparation of the environment” is what transforms an ordinary house into a home. As I watched my mother-in-law this Christmas, I realized that she is the Catechist of the home. Friends and neighbors were constantly popping by without warning just to say hello and she was always ready to receive them. This is because her home is full of life and as life happens it is received and cared for—the mail is put away, the laundry is folded, the pantry is stocked, and the Christmas presents are wrapped. In preparation for our first Christmas as newlyweds, she thoughtfully gathered all of my husband’s Christmas ornaments, a traditional gift in their family, and boxed them up so that he can incorporate them into our Christmas celebrations at home. With years of experience, she has developed habits that inform the environment of the home and make it a place that is truly inviting to those who visit.

Regarding my own home, I see that I have a long way to go. Traveling for work and to spend time with family has left things more “placeless” than I would like. It is undeniable that this lack of order takes away from the relaxing nature of home life, since all you notice as you look around is that something needs to be fixed or put away. For the first five months in our house our walls were bare. What was our encouragement to finally tend to this? Someone was coming to visit! Pictures and artwork were hung a few days before her arrival and the place immediately began to feel more like a home. I can’t help but reflect why, in the grand scheme of things, I care about all of this: Why do I want a beautiful home? I think one of the biggest reasons is because I want to invite friends and family to share in our life in a profound way and the beauty of an environment gives everyone a glimpse into our life but also invites them to a greater openness.

Fourteen years ago, I lived in a Carthusian monastery for a month. The quiet, disciplined and sparse existence of the cloister taught me that the order (or disorder!) of your environment directly impacts your interior life. If the bed is made, you are able to enter into prayer and the work of the day in a more complete way. Through her work to order the home, a woman in particular identifies herself with her home. Our home is an expression of who we are as individuals and as a couple, of what we love and what we find beautiful or inspiring. To welcome someone into the home is also a very intimate invitation to share in our life. It takes time to prepare a home in such a way that it can be open to others—thinking through their needs for food, comfort, and enjoyment. To create order in the home so that it can be hospitable to life, work, and prayer also requires order within the person. Developing habits that give life to the family within the home and those that visit are both practical (cleaning, preparing meals, caring for the structure of the home, etc.) and formative (growing in patience, sacrificing for the good of others, etc.). I have to come recognize that this process takes years to learn and to grow into as a family. Ultimately, it is our family life that I want to share when I invite someone into our home, and I want our life to be a place of respite and joy for others.

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