

CHAPTER ONE

Priority Loving Leads to Priority Living

In the midst of a conversation with my mom about home decorating, time management and caring for loved ones, I asked, “Mom, what is the key to homemaking?” If anyone would know, it would be she.

“Relationships are at the heart of homemaking.”

My mother’s response surprised me. She did not recommend a resource or offer a list of principles by which she had managed a home so well for more than five decades. Instead she explained that the art of homemaking had less to do with the tasks done inside of a house and more to do with the persons who make a house a home.¹

Persons, not tasks, create a dwelling place. The psalmist declares, “LORD, you have been our dwelling place / in all generations” (Psalm 90:1). The Lord himself *is* our dwelling; heaven is our eternal home because he dwells there.

We express our love for God and each family member through our attention to the details of life. We accomplish our homemaking tasks in service to the significant persons in our lives. Remember: It is God—not the devil—who is in the details! How can we contribute to the well-being of each family member in terms of his or her needs for food, clothing and shelter?

In the pages that follow, I share practical tips and biblical insights that have formed my vision of homemaking,

including resources that provide more details than I can recount in this book. In addition I offer a brief reflection on one of the sacraments following each pair of chapters on a homemaking topic.

FRAMING THE HOUSE(WORK)

An elderly priest provided a struggling mother, Holly Pierlot, with a framework to help her remember her priorities. His suggestion was simple: use five words that begin with the letter *P* to recall priorities in order of importance: *Prayer* (relationship with God), *Person* (your personal needs), *Partner* (relationship to your spouse), *Parent* (relationship to your child) and *Provider* (tasks of homemaking).

In addition Holly examined parallels between family life and the complexity of convent life: How could such a diverse group of people live in harmony? Could a family imitate this?

In her book *A Mother's Rule of Life*, Holly explains that a “rule” develops when a group of men or women share a particular mission. The leader writes a rule to balance the community’s mission with caring for those living in community in terms of prayer, physical work and leisure (like Saint Augustine and Saint Benedict). Once the rule is written, all community members vow obedience to it, so that they live a unified life (which is part of the process toward a community’s canonical status).

Individuals have also developed their own rules to serve as a compass for direction and forward movement in how they live their spiritual life in the midst of ordinary life.² Your rule of life—your overall mission through your vocation—can become a plumb line by which you evaluate and develop a plan for liv-

ing the priorities of your life. You author your plan, balancing the contemplative (prayer) and active aspects (tasks) of your vocation. Then you commit yourself to follow your plan of life each day, by the grace of God, knowing that you may need to adjust for temporary imbalances such as sick children, pregnancy challenges, or sleepless nights with a newborn. Keeping your overall rule of life in mind enables you to stay on track while adjusting to curves and bumps in the road of life.

Some form of accountability—your spouse, your spiritual director or like-minded friends—can help you stay on track so that your plan means more than New Year’s resolutions. Perhaps you could meet with other women to share words of encouragement and to pray for greater faithfulness for the following week as each of you makes progress. It’s a joy to know that even though you walk your own path, you do not walk alone.

Your rule of life can expand into a prayerful, proactive plan for daily living that helps you to live your priorities. It guides you in following Christ in your state in life, which can bring greater “order to your home and peace to your soul.”³

YOUR PLAN OF LIFE FOR PRAYER



The first priority is *Prayer*, which evokes your relationship with your heavenly Father. When Jesus summarized the law

and the prophets, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

You need to cultivate love for God as your deepest love, so that you can love others well with God’s grace and strength. You may have natural virtues, good habits and a kind nature, but you will not raise a godly family apart from God’s grace.

You love the Lord with “all your heart.” Jesus is your Savior and Lord; he is the one who has chosen you and cherishes you. He laid down his life to restore your relationship to your heavenly Father; you owe him everything.

You love the Lord with “all your soul” through your growth in virtue and your struggle against an inclination to sin. He provides the grace you need through spiritual direction and the sacraments. He strengthens your will so that you struggle against sloth while increasing your devotion to duty and faithful obedience to him.

You love the Lord with “all your mind” by renewing your mind through studying the faith; then your prayer and participation in the sacraments is enriched. Your growth in the knowledge of the faith is not extraneous to your role as wife and mother but at the heart of those roles. Not only can you set aside time for disciplined study and prayer, but you can also listen to talks while you exercise or clean.⁴ You can memorize Scripture, so that you can meditate on it while you carpool, garden or sit at a soccer practice. How often do you hear spiritual reading recommended and lament that it may be twenty

years before you will have time for it? Instead you can make time now, in small amounts, for reading the lives of saints or spiritual reading—it is time spent loving God with your mind.

Prayer is the breath of the soul, “the life of the new heart,” according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, 2697). Individual prayer is not a luxury we try to fit into our packed schedules. It is a necessity! Whether or not our prayer can occur before our little ones’ demands must be addressed—how *do* they sense I am trying to pray alone first thing in the morning?—we need to drink deeply from the well of God’s presence in order to refresh others.

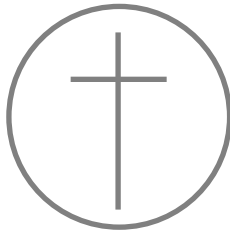
Family prayer helps too, but it cannot substitute for our one-on-one time with our heavenly Father. In the 1800s, Susannah Wesley, wife of a pastor and the mother of ten children, devised a way to get some prayer time alone: Her children knew that if she sat in the kitchen with her apron over her head, she was praying and was not to be disturbed. In the 1900s a pastor’s wife with three small children found that if she secured the room with all exits locked, she could put the children out of the playpen and climb into it. There she could pray or read her Bible without being touched for a few moments each day.

When Saint Paul instructs believers, “Pray constantly” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he is addressing ordinary Christians with active family lives. He does not expect them to devote hours to prayer; rather he wants them to permeate the day with prayer.

Loving God includes resting in his presence whether we are at home in prayer, before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration or at Mass. We share the concerns of our hearts and regain his peace-filled perspective. We remember who he is,

who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. Each day we renew our consecration for the day, and then our works, joys and sufferings become an extension of our prayer. We pray and then we act. We become heavenly minded *so that* we are earthly good (unlike the saying that claims someone is so heavenly minded that he or she is *no* earthly good).

A PLAN OF LIFE INCLUDES THE PERSON YOU ARE



The second priority is *Person*, meaning you! To fulfill the second greatest commandment—according to Jesus, to love your neighbor as you love yourself—you must love yourself.

You and I are called to appreciate who we are as beloved children of the Most High and then reach beyond ourselves to care for others. Truly loving ourselves is not inherently selfish; it is the antidote to selfishness. We have to be a “self” that is loved in order to give our “self” to another.

God teaches us how to love all others, including ourselves; for “we love, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). He wants us to love ourselves as he loves us, to accept his acceptance of us. He lavishes his grace and forgiveness on us, and in response we are able to extend grace and forgiveness to our spouse, our children and others.

Genuine love of self does not incur pride but humility. As Saint Paul warns, “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit,

but in humility count others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

So how do you love yourself? You love your entire person—intellect, will, emotions and body—as an integrated whole. Saint Paul asserts, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). You are to glorify God in your body.

For your sake and for the sake of your family’s well-being, you cannot neglect your health. Avoid both indulgence and neglect—it is not unspiritual to care for your body. Even Saint Francis of Assisi, toward the end of his life, recognized that his mortifications had been too hard on his body. As Saint Paul cautions, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

You may recognize your need for food, sleep and exercise, but have you thought through how much of each you need? You may be in a season of life when you cannot improve your sleep or add exercise, but can you discuss with your spouse or another mother these unmet needs to see how you can have greater balance? For example, is it possible to hire a mother’s helper to take the baby on a walk or play with the baby twice a week? Knowing you could nap might make a huge difference in your outlook.

In addition, what about the unique health concerns women have: PMS, menstrual cycles, pregnancy and menopause? When we understand what is happening in our bodies, we can respond more appropriately. We ought not excuse poor behavior nor suffer in silence as if hormone shifts are not affecting us. When I feel out of control of my emotions,

the mental picture I have is of a baby who accidentally scratches herself unless someone puts socks on her hands—Lord, protect me from myself and from inadvertently harming others. My mother so aptly quipped, “You have to take care of you *so that* you can take care of them.” As we care for our basic needs, we are more attuned to our loved ones’ basic needs.

Emotional health includes growing in self-awareness and self-knowledge. What are your natural strengths and weaknesses, given your personality and temperament? How can greater self-understanding contribute to the well-being of your family? Are your emotional needs being met: to love, to be loved, to have a sense of belonging and to have good relationships within the family? Are you factoring in any current family dynamic (a new baby, a move, a wedding, unexpected bills or a new job) that requires you to adjust to physical or emotional stress?

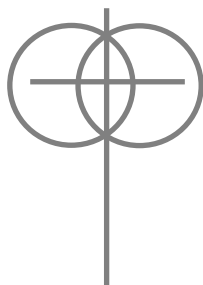
How about mental health? Have you identified positive and negative influences from your family of origin? What do you want to incorporate into your family, and what do you not want to repeat? Since all family trees are connected to Adam’s, all families experience dysfunction to a degree, though some dysfunction is more serious than others. It is not a matter of adding one more rosary or one more novena to make a problem go away—problems must be addressed. We want to grow in holiness *and* wholeness.

Sometimes we need help from family, friends or professionals. Spouses and other loved ones are not mind readers; they may not offer help unless we tell them our needs. Then we need to respond to their offers of help. Even Jesus accepted the help of Simon the Cyrene when the Roman guards forced

Simon to carry Jesus' cross for him. Jesus knew it would help Simon to help him. Who knows how the Lord will work in someone's life when we permit him or her to help us?

We may need counseling, medication or changes in our diet, sleep or activity level. Perhaps we need a special day set aside on a regular basis for rest, relaxation, contemplation and reading—a time for spiritual direction and an opportunity for Confession that helps us discern what suffering should be “offered up” and what needs the assistance of a doctor or a counselor. In addition, we benefit from hobbies, crafts, musical instruments and talent development as creative outlets for personal renewal. We can also try a number of examples of creativity in the home offered by Edith Schaeffer in *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (Tyndale, 1971). When our reservoir is full, there is more to give.

IF MARRIED,
YOUR NEXT PRIORITY IS YOUR PARTNER



The third priority, *Partner*, refers to your relationship to your beloved. Your covenant partner is your greatest gift, after Christ and his spouse, the Church. This priority is not on the