

“Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes”

- Acts 2:46

The very first Eucharistic celebrations, gatherings for the breaking of bread, took place not in temple or church, but in the domestic sphere of ordinary homes.

In his homily for Laetare Sunday Father Sylvester encouraged us to use this time of separation from the familiar apparatus of public worship to recover the spirit of *ecclesiola* - the little, or domestic Church, grounded in faith practised by the family.

And in fact, for the first three centuries of Christianity, the *domus ecclesiae*, or house churches, were the local spaces where the universal Spirit moved. Out of these domestic places, the Eucharistic liturgies developed and the Christian faith grew.

We hear references to them scattered throughout *Acts* and the letters of St Paul. In Judea, after his miraculous jailbreak, Peter “went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who is called Mark, where there were many people gathered in prayer” (Acts 12:12). Similarly, released from prison in Philippi, Paul and Silas “went to Lydia’s house where they saw and encouraged the brothers” (Acts 16:40) before leaving for Thessalonica.

Paul’s letter to the Romans ends with greetings to “Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus... also the church at their house” in the first specific mention of the *domus ecclesiae*. This holy couple, Prisca and Aquila, first encountered Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:1-2) where they opened their house to him, then accompanied him to Ephesus and let their home in that city be used as a church (1 Cor 16:19). As is evident from *Romans* this indefatigable pair later moved to Rome where their house became again a domestic hub of evangelization.

Authors of 3rd-6th centuries interpreted Paul’s reference to the domestic church (καὶ τὴν κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν) as a household whose members were exceptionally pious, serving Christ and the faithful; scholars of the Middle Ages consolidated the belief that *ecclesia domestica* can be equated with *familia christiana*.

The remains of a building in Syria, at Dura Europos, are the earliest archaeological evidence of this phenomenon. Here, an ordinary house was converted for worship sometime between AD 233 and 256. Frescoes decorating a room in this house are very likely the oldest examples of Christian painting, and involve some of the first extant physical representations of Jesus Christ.



Image: Ramsay Macmullen, "The Second Church: Popular Christianity AD 200-400" (2009).

What can we learn from these scattered references in Scripture, or from these Syrian ruins? The house church remains in Dura Europos had fallen prey to the iconoclastic frenzy of Islamic State by 2014, though the frescoes were, thank God, preserved: the persecution of Christians is as old as the Faith.

The women's houses visited by Peter in Judea, and by Paul and Silas in Philippi, were first of all places of refuge from persecution. Throughout the Roman Empire, up until the Edict of Milan in AD 313, to confess the Faith was to invite official suspicion, popular hostility and heroic martyrdom. For the first three centuries AD, the city of Rome itself, the city of churches, held no Christian churches within its bounds. The seeds that would flower into the Universal Church of the Catholic Faith were sown in hidden hearts, nurtured in modest homes much like our own, in the domestic church of the family, the *ecclesiola*.

“Godhead here in hiding”: so the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described the Blessed Sacrament in his translation of the eucharistic hymn *Adoro Te Devote*. This Easter, dear brothers and sisters, our churches will stand empty and Godhead in hiding under the sign of bread may seem doubly hidden from us.

So let us take every occasion we can to see the likeness of God in each other. Let us invite the Spirit of God into our hearts, into our homes. Let us recover the talents of family piety in our domestic devotions. Mass from St Bernard's is available to watch online every Sunday for as long as this lockdown lasts: links will be posted on the ESM webpage. The Easter Vigil and Easter Day Masses will be livestreamed - so join us, with your families, to celebrate the rites and the liturgies of our living Faith. Light candles, join in the responses, and pray with the Universal Church that God will bring a speedy end to this global pandemic: *Kyrie eleison - Christe eleison - Kyrie eleison*.

P.D.