Q: What made you want to write this book?

Rubio: Ever since I can remember, I’ve been thinking about what it means to live a good life and how the good life for Christians might be different from the middle class norm. After college, I spent some time living and working in a shelter for homeless families run by a married couple with four kids. But most Christian married couples I knew were living pretty much like everyone else around them. I started to think about how family life might look if more people questioned the status quo.

Q: Why should we be concerned with the ordinary in morality?

Rubio: When most people think about ethics, they think about controversial issues such as abortion, war, or hunger. Those issues are incredibly important, but most of us do not have the opportunity to influence them at the macro level. We do make moral decisions every day about time, work, resources, and relationships. Yet these issues get very little attention from moral thinkers. I argue that ordinary moral choices are complicated, influential, and worthy of attention.

Q: What is wrong with having a saint as a moral role model?

Rubio: Many saints or soon-to-be saints are role models for me. Oscar Romero is one. But the problem is that most saints are single, celibate, and radical, so we can admire them but it’s hard to translate their examples into our much messier lives. As a consequence, their practical importance is limited. Those of us who have chosen less radical paths—having a family and living in the suburbs, for instance—need to ask hard questions about how we can still live as disciples of Christ.

Q: What goods would be lost from following a Dorothy Day lifestyle?

Rubio: I'm a great admirer of Dorothy Day and I am in awe of many of my former students who choose to join the Catholic Worker Movement today. Their example makes me struggle with my life choices, but that’s part of their calling, “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” But we can appreciate the CWM and also appreciate the value of middle class Christian families who have money to give away, influence in a variety of workplaces, and resources to build institutions that deal with problems at the macro level.

Q: You discuss the idea of the family as a sort of “mini-church” in the book, could you explain this idea further?

Rubio: For Catholics, it is traditional to say that the family is a domestic church or that parents are the first religious educators of their children. And so much of what we learn about ethics is learned from rejecting or respecting the example of family members. Yet, I think families could do much more if they adopted intentional practices like the ones I talk about in the book. And because our post-Vatican II idea of church is of a church engaged in the world, those practices are not limited to prayer or going to mass, but include service and living more simply in order to be able to give more money to those in need.
Q: How is mainstream American family life problematic for families and the common good?
Rubio: There are many difficulties, but one of most significant is the impetus to “focus on family.” We can get so caught up in working to provide the best for our kids, keeping up our house and stuff, and getting children to all of their activities that we lose sight of what should be central in our lives.

Q: Why can’t Catholic social teaching be implemented just at the level of policy?
Rubio: Policy is crucial, but Catholic teaching also includes a concern for the choices of individuals and families. There is a sense that we can’t solve our social problems with the efforts of governments or nonprofits alone. We also need to pay attention to what’s happening in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. We can work from the ground up as well as from the top down.

Q: How do you see families as agents of social change?
Rubio: When we make every day choices about what to buy or what not to buy, for instance, we influence what kind of society we live in. So if we choose to shop at big box stores, they will thrive, but if my neighbors and I make a point to patronize the used clothing store, independent café, and farmer’s market in our town, we will have alternatives that are better for human beings and the earth.

Q: You lay out many suggested practices for the family in your book. Are there any that your own children were particularly enthusiastic about practicing?
Rubio: My kids have struggled with some aspects of our choices about how to eat, but mostly they enjoy this practice. They like the nightly family meals, the mostly vegetarian entrees, and the homemade snacks, though they do wish for more soda and ice cream. They like the fact that we frequently share our table and embrace our desire to exclude no one. Our Friday pizza-video night is also very popular.

Q: Which practice do you find the most challenging?
Rubio: I identify shared prayer as a challenging practice in the book and speak of how hard it is to come together when beliefs differ. This comes out of my own experience of being a parent of children whose beliefs are their own. So while we’ve been able to engage in various forms of prayer over the years, including bible study, Advent and Lenten reflections, special blessings, and even meditation, we struggle to find a consistent practice that is life-giving for everyone. I hope that honest recognition of these difficulties will help people reading the book know that I certainly don’t have it all figured out and write to begin a conversation that I need as much as anyone else.

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