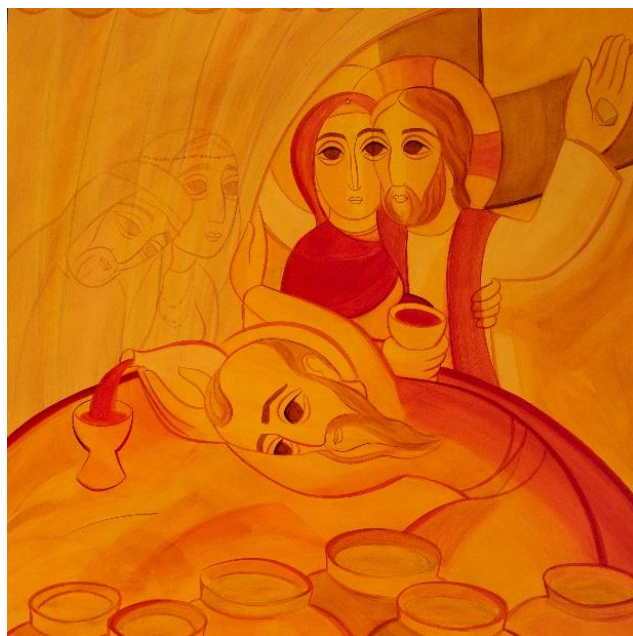




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The Domestic Church & Synodality

**Gregory K. Popcak & Lisa A. Popcak -USA-
Conference n.1**





THE DOMESTIC CHURCH & SYNODALITY

Toward a New Ecclesiology Through the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life

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As Pope Francis uses the term, “synodality” is a prophetic call for a Church that listens, the Body of Christ attending generously and compassionately to the needs of each of its parts. In the context of this gathering, “synodality” is a call for the hierarchical church and the domestic church to learn from each other and find ways to help each distinct manifestation of “church” fulfill its mission in Christ.

And what’s that mission? In a word, “holiness!” Holiness is for everyone! *Especially* families! By proclaiming the “universal call to holiness” (LG. #39), the Second Vatican Council reminded the world that holiness wasn’t just for missionaries, martyrs, priests, or religious. It was for moms, dads, and kids too!

But what does it actually mean for families to “be holy?” We’ve invited some friends to join us via satellite to help us answer the question:

(ROLL CatholicHOM VIDEO CLIP-- 1:20 -“Can families be holy?”)

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ms2etwbscs89c2uhmdiik/PFI-PP-2022-05-20-WMOF-Slide-Deck-r2.pptx?dl=0&rlkey=nw27duriyn00158ssr1mdnr02>

That’s a clip from the animated series at the heart of CatholicH-O-M.com which stands for Catholic Households on Mission, a new online resource for Catholic families. But besides being a humorous way to introduce the topic of family holiness, the clip highlights a real problem. Families want to be holy, but we’ve not been given family-friendly tools to achieve our mission.



Most of what we think of as “Catholic spirituality” is drawn from the monastic and clerical traditions. As valuable as these practices are, they can be hard to fit into busy family life. Parents often tell us, “I *used* to have a great prayer life...*before* I got married and had kids!” Many Catholics believe that *family* life is somehow antithetical to leading a *holy* life. Still, in the last few years, the Holy Spirit appears to be working hard to challenge this deeply-flawed narrative. In particular, the lockdowns associated with the global pandemic became a catalyst for serious conversations about the need for new, domestic-church-based approaches to Catholic spirituality.

As Cardinal Mario Grech, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, explained in an interview in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Church’s experience of the pandemic “*suggests* that the future of the Church lies...in rehabilitating the domestic Church and giving it more space, a *Church-family* consisting of a number of *families-Church*. We must live the Church within our families” (Spodaro, 2021). Cardinal Grech also noted the need for a “new ecclesiology.” One that expected the domestic church to be a true and active partner in the life and mission of the Church.

But what does it mean, *practically speaking*, to “live the Church within our families?” Serendipitously, just before the pandemic, our organization, the *Pastoral Solutions Institute*, in association with our partners at **the** *Our Sunday Visitor Institute*, *Holy Cross Family Ministries*, and the *McGrath Institute for Church Life*, began seeking answers to this question. Together, we organized the *Symposium on Catholic Family Life and Spirituality* at the University of Notre Dame in the Summer of 2019 (Popcak, 2020). The *Symposium* was a multi-disciplinary, ideologically and culturally diverse gathering of over 50 theologians, social scientists, pastoral ministry professionals, and Church leaders, all chosen for their expertise in fields related to family well-being and spirituality.

Participants explored *four critical questions* related to the renewal of Catholic family life:

1. In light of the Catholic vision of the family, are Catholic families called to relate differently to each other than our non-Catholic and non-Christian counterparts?
2. Given that most practices associated with Catholic spirituality are drawn from the monastic and clerical traditions and can be difficult to integrate into family life, *what would an authentic, domestic-church-based spirituality look like in practice?*



3. Because so many of the Church's ministry efforts are spent chasing after sheep that should never have been lost in the first place--children raised in Catholic homes--*what more can be done to help Catholic families become forges of intentional discipleship and raise the next generation of intentional disciples?*

4. How can Catholic families be equipped to participate more effectively in the life and mission of the Church, *servng as the primary outposts of evangelization and positive social change?*

For three days, attendees presented research, prayed together, and engaged in discussions intended to offer a coherent response to these questions. Two significant insights emerged from this effort.

The First Insight: A Practical Definition of “Domestic Church”

The first was the need for a practical definition of the term “domestic church.” Although the Catechism (#2204) *theologically* defines a domestic church as “a specific revelation of ecclesial communion,” that definition offers little practical insight into what it requires to establish or maintain a healthy, dynamic, domestic church life. Drawing on the research presented at the *Symposium*, we developed a working definition of “domestic church” as:

a household of persons united to God and each other through the sacramental life of the Church AND committed to living out the Christian/Trinitarian vision of love in their relationships with each other and the world.

The more a particular household reflects this vision, the more that household *already is* a domestic church. By contrast, the more a specific household struggles to reflect this vision, the more that household *is being called to become* an even more dynamic domestic church.

We believe this working definition is appropriately inclusive of all types of Catholic households (e.g., married and divorced households, single-parent families, grandparenting families, foster families, etc.) while still giving proper due to households rooted in the Sacrament of Matrimony. This is important because while all types of domestic churches participate in the life of the Church, every domestic church must ultimately be ordered toward Christian marriage—both in terms of its own call to share in the grace of marriage and in its responsibility to raise children who are well-prepared to celebrate the fullness of Christian marriage in adulthood.



The Second Insight: The Liturgy of Domestic Church Life

The second fruit of the *Symposium* was the ability to articulate the specific elements of what we call “the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*” (Popcak, 2020). In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis writes, “The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures” (9, #315). Through this lens, we see that the small, family practices that make up the spiritual framework of the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* give families both implicit and explicit means by which they can cooperate with the grace of all the sacraments--especially the Eucharist—and be transformed into dynamic domestic churches. In the words of Archbishop Michael Mouradian, the Armenian Catholic Eparch of North America, “*The Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* represents the mystical vehicle that communicates Eucharistic grace to the whole world through the living Body of Christ.”

We suggest that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is an *actual liturgy*. It’s the liturgy that’s integral to the life and ministry of the domestic church. In the online trainings we offer at *PeytonFamilyInstitute.org*, we present a more thorough case for this assertion but for the sake of time, we’ll simply review some highlights.

Instituted Not Invented

First, like **all** liturgies, the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* was instituted, not invented.

In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that **people** can’t invent a liturgy. **God** must institute it. The word “liturgy” refers to a particular act of worship *given to us by God himself* to heal the damage sin does to our relationships with God and each other. For instance, people didn’t invent the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*. Christ instituted it at the Last Supper to restore our union with God and make communion with others possible.

Similarly, at the dawn of creation, God wove the implicit practices we collectively call “the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*” into his design of the human family. These practices have not only been shown by social science research to enable families (throughout history and across every culture) to flourish on a human level but, lived prayerfully and intentionally, these habits equip families to participate in the love that flows from the heart of the Trinity. We suggest that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is the primordial liturgy God instituted to heal the damage sin inflicts on the human family, the very foundation of society and the Church.

Liturgy, Church, & Priesthood



The second reason we suggest that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is an actual liturgy is related to the intimate connection between liturgy, church, and priesthood. In the Catholic understanding, a church can't function as "church" without a liturgy that's integral to its existence. God does not establish a Church without simultaneously giving it a liturgy, a particular act of worship designed to heal the damage sin does to our relationships with him and others. For instance, the Church could not be "The Church" without the *Liturgy of the Eucharist*.

The domestic church is not a metaphorical church. According to the Catechism, it's actually *church* (#2204). But if that's true, what's the liturgy integral to its existence? What's the liturgy that equips it to heal the damage sin does to human relationships at the most atomic level of society?

The same is true of the priesthood. There's no such thing as a priesthood without a liturgy that's integral to it. That's why we celebrate both the institution of the Eucharist and Holy Orders on Holy Thursday. The ministerial priesthood can't exist without the *Liturgy of the Eucharist* and vice versa.

But what about the common priesthood of the laity that's conferred at baptism? Though it's distinct from the ministerial priesthood, the lay priesthood is an *actual priesthood*. As David Fagerberg, quoting *Lumen Gentium* (#10), explains,

The common priesthood of the laity is directed toward the cure of this now corrupted structure of the world, and the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood to equip them for their lay apostolate.... Therefore, "though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial... priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ."

If the lay priesthood is a true priesthood directed toward healing the corrupted structure of the world, what's the liturgy *over which* the lay priesthood presides and *by which* it consecrates the world to Christ?

We suggest that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* both enables the domestic church to function fully *as church* **and** makes it possible for the lay priesthood to be experienced—not merely as an abstract theological concept—but as an actual, vital priesthood with fundamental dignity and spiritual authority proper to its state. This latter point also illustrates how the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*, by offering a new look at the dignity and role of the lay priesthood, could provide an effective and positive antidote to the problem of clericalism.



Celebrating the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life

All of this leads to two questions:

-“What, exactly, is the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*?

-“How is it celebrated?”

The *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is composed of three rites:

-The Rite of Christian Relationship

-The Rite of Family Rituals

-The Rite of Reaching Out

On a natural level, these rites are supported by decades of social science research highlighting the practices associated with healthy family functioning around the world and throughout history. *On a spiritual level*, these rites are rooted in the priestly, prophetic, and royal missions of baptism, respectively.

The Rite of Christian Relationship helps families live out the priestly mission of baptism. It suggests simple practices that enable families to consecrate their daily lives to God by infusing every interaction with the sacrificial love of Christ.

The Rite of Family Rituals helps families exercise the prophetic mission of baptism. Through their words and actions, prophets call people to live godly lives (CCC #905). When Christian families create meaningful rituals for *working, playing, talking, and praying* together, they prophetically call each other to cultivate Christian attitudes toward work, fun, relationships, and faith.

The Rite of Reaching Out helps families celebrate the royal mission of baptism. To reign with Christ is to serve with him (c.f. LG#36). In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis reminds us that caring for others is integral to family spirituality (AL 9,#312). The *Rite of Reaching Out* suggests practical ways every family can be God’s blessing to each other and the world. Additionally, the practices encouraged by this rite can help families discern the unique *mission* and *charism* God has given their particular domestic church.

The more a family combines shared participation in the sacramental life of the Church **with** the (implicit or explicit) celebration of the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*, the more that family is equipped to become a dynamic *domestic church*. Next, we’ll offer a brief look at the various practices associated with these three rites.



The Rite of Christian Relationship equips families to exercise the priestly mission of baptism through four simple practices that enable them to fill every interaction with the sacrificial love of Christ. The four practices are:

1. ***Schedule Family Time First***—Catholic families must *be intentional* about making time to create communion. Christian households should be encouraged to schedule family time first, planning other activities--as they might reasonably fit--*around* family meals, family game nights, family prayer, household projects, connecting time, etc. Each household must discern and protect the specific amount of time they need each week to maintain strong relationships.
2. ***Exhibit Extravagant Affection & Affirmation***—Christ’s love is extravagant and super-abundant. He became man so that we might experience his love through our senses. He gave us the sacraments so we could continue to experience his love through our senses even after his Ascension. Through the sacraments, God’s arms are always open to his children. Christian families model Christ’s incarnational, sensate, super-abundant love—*and* facilitate secure psychological attachment—when they demonstrate appropriate, extravagant affection and affirmation.
3. ***Exhibit Prompt, Generous, Cheerful, & Consistent Attention to Each Other’s Needs***—God responds to our needs before the words are on our tongues (Ps 139:4). Moreover, the human family was made in the image of the Trinity, which St Bonaventure said was like a three-bucket water wheel--constantly pouring itself out but never running dry because it was perpetually being filled up again by the other buckets. This Trinitarian vision of love is the model for healthy family life. Through prompt, generous, cheerful, & consistent attention to each other’s needs, Christian families serve as “icons of the Trinity,” witnessing to the **mutually self-giving** love that flows from the heart of God.
4. ***Discipleship Discipline***—Christ is a good shepherd who leads his flock with gentle patience, care, and love. *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us that “all family life is a shepherding in mercy” (AL 9, #322). The *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* calls Christian parents to emulate the Good Shepherd by practicing what we call “Discipleship Discipline,” a gentle, attachment-based approach to parenting rooted in St John Bosco’s *Preventive System* of



child-rearing (Avallone, 1999; Bosco, 2010). Don Bosco rejected harsh punishments. He counseled close mentor-mentee relationships between caregivers and children.

Discipleship Discipline represents the divine pedagogy applied to parenting. It helps parents claim their children’s hearts for Christ and gives parents gentle, positive, supportive methods to raise godly adults. And it’s effective. In fact, this approach raised a saint! Don Bosco’s student, St. Dominic Savio, is considered “the first fruit of the *Preventive System*.” We describe Discipleship Discipline at length in our books, *Parenting Your Kids with Grace* and *Parenting Your Teens and Tweens with Grace* (OSV, 2021).

Next, *The Rite of Family Rituals* helps families live the prophetic mission of baptism. When families create meaningful, daily rituals for *working, playing, talking, and praying* together every day, they prophetically call each other to develop Christian attitudes toward work, fun, relationships, and faith. Family rituals are the heart of Christian discipleship in the home. The four practices in this rite are:

1. **Family Work Rituals**—Regularly choosing to do certain household chores *together* enables families to practice solidarity (i.e., teamwork) and stewardship. Families face a constant temptation to see the tasks of daily life as mere drudgery. By contrast, appropriately done, *family work rituals* help families experience even mundane household tasks as an opportunity to show up for each other and create strong bonds.
2. **Family Play Rituals**—In a world that often equates fun with sinful, self-destructive behavior, *family play rituals* (e.g., game nights, movie nights, family days, outings, celebrations, etc.) teach family members healthy, godly ways to lead joyful lives. *Family play rituals* remind families to celebrate life in their domestic church by doing their best to fill their homes with joy and laughter.
3. **Family Talk Rituals**—Catholic families must make intentional, daily time to discuss topics that don’t come up naturally, such as how they’ve encountered God in the highs and lows of the day and how they might do a better job taking care of each other. Talk rituals build communion through communication.



4. ***Family Prayer Rituals***—Christian families are called to invite God into their homes, relating to him as the most important member of their family. By creating regular times throughout the day to pray *together* and reflect on God’s call, families discover the specific ways God is leading them to cherish, love, and serve each other more generously.

Finally, ***The Rite of Reaching Out*** helps families live the royal mission of baptism. By practicing four simple habits, family members learn to use their gifts to be God’s blessing to each other and their communities. These practices include:

1. ***Serving Each Other Generously At Home***—Christ’s call to love our neighbor begins with our closest neighbors, our family! It can be tempting to focus on serving people who give us special credit while ignoring the people we live with. Generous service in the home fosters intimate communion and healthy attachment. Each day, families should discuss, “*What’s (at least) one thing we can do to make each other’s day a little easier or more pleasant?*”
2. ***Thinking of Others While Being a Family-At-Home***—Through the *Ministries of Charity* and *Hospitality*, families can be a profound blessing to others without even leaving their front door! Simple but meaningful activities such as cooking meals for a neighbor-in-need, budgeting for charitable giving, donating gently-used goods to others in need, and making our homes a place for people to enjoy godly fun and fellowship are just a few ways families can bless others from inside their domestic churches.
3. ***Being Godly Families-in-the-World***—Through the *Ministry of Kindness*, families can bless everyone they encounter. Pope Francis (2015) often reminds families of the spiritual importance of being courteous, polite, and doing small acts of kindness as they run errands, go out to dinner, or engage in other activities. As they interact with people in the world, family members should ask, “*What’s one small thing we can do to leave each person we meet a little happier than we found them?*”.
4. ***Domestic Churches Serving Together***—Families shouldn’t let parish and community service become one more thing that divides them. To the degree it’s possible, families should engage in parish ministry and community service *together*. When family members



serve the world side-by-side, not only do they bless others through their specific charitable works, but even more importantly, they bless others through their shared witness of love.

Spark. Kindle. Blaze.

The relationship between the three rites of the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is akin to the steps of building a fire: *Spark. Kindle. Blaze!*

The *Rite of Christian Relationship* ignites the *spark* of God’s love in the home, filling everything a family does with a holy warmth and affection. The *Rite of Family Rituals* provides the kindling that allows that spark to catch and keeps the fire burning. The *Rite of Reaching Out* provides the light and heat that draws the world to Christ. Each is essential.

Without the spark of God’s love provided by the *Rite of Christian Relationship*, family rituals become a pile of dry wood--one more task for families to bicker about. Without the *Rite of Family Rituals*, the spark can’t catch, and the flame is easily blown out. Without the *Rite of Reaching Out*, there’s no light or heat. The fire is too small to be truly useful.

In sum, we want to emphasize that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* is a spiritual framework. A liturgy. Not a program. It represents the collection of divinely-instituted practices that-- united with sacramental grace--enable families to function as dynamic domestic churches.

A Common Framework. Diverse Expressions:

The three rites of the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* provide a common but universally adaptable framework by which the Church can evangelize families and promote a uniquely Catholic vision of family life.

This is a similar approach to family life that the Church has promoted for centuries for religious life. All religious communities have a similar structure. All religious communities take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but how each community *lives* those vows differs widely based on their specific mission, charism, and rule of life. In a similar way, the rites and practices associated with the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* give the religious communities we call “domestic churches” a common framework each family around the world can customize with their own family, ethnic, and cultural traditions, rituals, and practices.



Through our online trainings at *PeytonFamilyInstitute.org*, we've presented the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* to family ministers in over 30 countries on five continents. Their feedback tells us that the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* offers an authentically multicultural, universally adaptable approach to family spirituality and well-being while simultaneously giving Catholic families a common language they can use to encourage and support each other in living healthy, holy lives.

Implications for Broader Renewal

The *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* not only offers new directions in family spirituality it also gives rise to a radical new approach to family ministry. In *Divine Likeness* (2006), Marc Cardinal Ouellet notes, “Until recently, the family was considered the terminal point... for applying...the Church’s pastoral decisions. The post-Vatican II appreciation of the family as ‘domestic church,’ ...opens to it undreamed-of perspectives of participation in the salvific mission of the Church.”

Domestic Church-Planting

Instead of viewing family ministry as simply “ministry to families,” the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* model challenges family ministers to become *Domestic Church Planters*. *Church Planting* is a term used (primarily by Evangelical Christians) to describe the process by which a larger, thriving congregation establishes new, vibrant, local congregations. The *Domestic Church-Planting* model gives family ministers a blueprint for building dynamic domestic churches from the ground up. This is accomplished by teaching families to gracefully celebrate the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* in daily life and through various trials.

As Domestic Church Planters, family life ministers become responsible for facilitating every stage of the establishment and ongoing development of all the domestic churches that make up the parish or diocese they serve. The family life minister, as *Domestic Church-Planter*, is charged with forming the families that make up the “family of families” (AL #87), that is, the Church.

Renewing Parish Life

This model also challenges every parish to see its primary role as *Domestic Church-Planting*. Parishes are not meant to be inwardly focused. They primarily exist to form, nourish, and support—**that is, “to “plant”--domestic churches**; outposts of grace in a hurting world. The *Liturgy of Domestic*



Church Life gives parish ministers the tools they need to help every family in a parish “become what it is” (c.f., FC#17), a ministry in its own right—a fully functioning *domestic church*.

On June 15th of this year, dioceses and parishes were given a new opportunity to become domestic church planters when Pope Francis released a document titled *Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life*. In it, he calls for a full year of marriage preparation for engaged couples and a two-to-three-year period of mystagogical accompaniment post-marriage. This new initiative gives the Church a perfect opportunity to teach engaged couples about the specific domestic church-building practices that make up the three rites of the Liturgy of Domestic Church Life and to support newly married couples in living these practices out in both their daily lives and through the various trials they may face. The Liturgy of Domestic Church Life gives Church ministers a practical framework to communicate a uniquely Catholic vision of marriage and family life and the tools to help couples live it out.

Challenging Ministry Paradigms

Moving beyond marriage and family ministry, the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life/Domestic Church Planting model* also challenges how dioceses and parishes structure their overall ministry efforts. This model reminds us that the Church is essentially made up of two interrelated parts: the hierarchical church (the diocese, parish, and clergy) on the one hand and the domestic church on the other. The *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life/Domestic Church P* model proposes that every ministry not ordered to the proper functioning of the hierarchical church should be placed under a diocesan or parish *Office of Domestic Church Ministry*. Why? Because virtually every ministry to the laity should ideally be focused on helping beneficiaries either:

- form* strong domestic churches,
- maintain* strong domestic churches,
- participate* more effectively in their existing domestic churches,
- help* domestic churches support struggling members,
- assist* struggling domestic churches in becoming whole again,
- or *enable* people on the margins to connect with welcoming domestic churches in which they could participate as true brothers and sisters-in-Christ

In the broader scope, the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* creates new opportunities for authentic renewal, not just of the family, but of the Church. It ushers in a new ecclesiology, rooted in a



framework of accompaniment, that gives the hierarchical and domestic church new ways to **listen to and learn from** each other.

Additional Resources

We've only begun to scratch the surface, and, unfortunately, there's very little time for questions at the Congress. Because of this, we've produced a free e-book addressing the most frequently asked questions about the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* and its implications for the renewal of both the family and the Church. Available in all the official languages of the Congress, you can download this resource, learn more about our next online training in the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life*, and discover other resources for families at PeytonFamilyInstitute.org.

In conclusion, we believe *The Year of Amoris Laetitia Family* has created a historic opportunity to renew the entire Church by helping the hierarchical and domestic church enter into a new era of collegial dialog and mutual accompaniment.

To that end, we propose that teaching families to celebrate the *Liturgy of Domestic Church Life* will equip them to “become what they are” (FC#17), “little churches” (Chrysostom), oases of grace in a dry and parched world. Through this effort, born in synodality, the hierarchical and domestic churches—as well as the ministerial and lay priesthoods—could learn to see each other as “co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord” (USCCB, 2005), true collaborators in the “life and mission of the Church” (FC #17).

Compare with spoken text