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Revised and Expanded Edition

SHARING
the Faith
WITH
Your Child
From Birth to Age Four

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AND MARY KAY LEATHERMAN



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Prayer in the Family

“Young or old, we learn to pray by praying. We come to be at home with prayer. And home is what and where prayer must be. If prayer is to be familiar ground, a place where we are comfortable, then prayer needs to flow through life where it is lived.”

GABE HUCK

YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPING AWARENESS of God's presence in your home and family includes a need to speak with God. As the child's image of God is formed through the experiences of everyday life, ways of communicating with him also need to be encouraged.

Prayer is our primary means of communing with God. A family that fully expresses its role as domestic Church will find prayer a necessary part of its life. This does not mean that a great deal of time must be spent in prayer. It simply means that the family makes prayer a regular part of its life instead of praying only when there is enough time or when there is a crisis. What matters is that you and your child accept prayer as a basic part of your lives.

Example Is an Effective Teacher

Your example is the most effective teacher your child can have. If prayer is important to you, it will be important to your child.

Not only when you pray but how you pray forms a significant impression. Do you kneel and pray the rosary in the privacy of your bedroom? Do you joyfully exclaim "God, thank you for this beautiful spring morning"? Do you pause for quiet moments of reflection as you go about your duties? These are all examples of prayer.

The content of your prayer also affects your child's own development of prayer life. Are your prayers those of praise and thanksgiving? Do you pray for guidance, for forgiveness, for favors? Why is prayer important to you?

Prayer is part of your personal relationship with God. In this regard, remember: your image of God affects your relationship with God and the way you express this relationship in prayer. When you pray together, you strongly influence your child's image of God and relationship with him.

Prayer is also important to your participation in a community of Christians. You need to experience prayer by yourself. You also need to experience it with others—as husband and wife together, as parent and child together, within the entire family, within the community. And just as you need to experience prayer both in personal and in community settings, your child needs this too. As soon as he is able to speak to God in his own words, encourage him to do it. And involve him in family prayer as well.

Making time for family prayer can be difficult in today's busy household. The best time will not be the same in every home. The best times are the ones that work for you, whether they be during the evening meal, at bedtime, early in the morning, or at midday.

Formal Prayer or Spontaneous Prayer?

Should little children be expected to learn the Our Father, or is it better for them to speak to God in their own words? There is really no need to make such a choice. There is room both for spontaneous and for formal prayer.

Although a three-year-old cannot possibly appreciate the beauty and significance of the Lord's Prayer, the prayer was given to us by Jesus himself and is a vital part of our Christian heritage. It can be truly inspiring to anyone, including a child, to witness a community of Christians praying the Lord's Prayer together. Children can sense great meaning from this experience, even if they do not understand all of the words.

Little children should be exposed to formal prayers, but they should not be forced to memorize them. Rather, they should be encouraged to speak with God in their own language, at their own level of ability, as if conversing with a good friend or a parent. After all, their relationship with

God is modeled on relationships experienced with the people in their lives.

The early prayers of your child will be very concrete. Grace at meals may call on God to bless each fork, napkin, and dish of food on the table. Bedtime may bring a request for God to provide a new toy or to make a big sister stop teasing. To your younger child, these are the important things.

Spontaneous, informal prayer also is important. It is not something for children to do only until they are old enough to understand more mature language. Many adults do not feel comfortable expressing their faith through spontaneous prayer. But expressing your thoughts and feelings in your own words is just as important to you as it is to your child. Remember, the words of Jesus in the Our Father were originally his spontaneous prayer. When you communicate with God in your own words, you let your child know that it is acceptable for adults as well as children.

You may wonder about the rosary or other devotional forms. Praying in these ways by yourself is a wonderful example to your child because the child sees that these devotions are meaningful to you. However, little children are not able to remain attentive for very long. So, in the family setting, short prayers, songs, and meditations may be more appropriate.

If you need guidance in developing family prayer times, see the resources listed on page 111.

Mary and the Bible

You may have grown up feeling a special closeness to Mary, the spiritual mother of all Christians. She was a special example of openness to God's will. As Jesus' mother, she shared many of the experiences of all parents, even though her child was the Son of God. If you communicate to your child your

devotion to Mary, you give your child the opportunity to develop similar feelings.

The use of Scripture with young children is sometimes a concern to parents. Bible stories should be chosen carefully for the message they contain. Many lessons of Scripture cannot be grasped by small children. You may wish to tell the story to the child in your own words so that you communicate the message you want your child to hear.

The important thing is not so much how, where, or when you pray. The important thing is that prayer flows through your life.

13 Education in the Family

Ian's mother turned to him at the lunch table and asked, "What did you learn in Sunday school today, Ian?"

Three year-old Ian replied, "Oh, we learned about Jesus and his fossils, but not the type I know you are thinking of, Mom. These fossils were the guys he hung out with, not dinosaurs."

THE ULTIMATE EDUCATION for a child's faith begins at home. This is the one of the strongest messages this book hopes to instill in the readers. Parents model faith in a simple gesture of blessing a child before he goes to sleep and in the amazing effort it takes to get everyone to church on time—especially when sleeping in is a real temptation.

Parents have the main role in teaching a child about faith in the Catholic family, but the greatest supplement is the school or parish that teaches Catholic education to the child. Eventually the child will experience the sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation in the schools or programs which the parents have chosen for that child. Parents of young children have so much to look forward to.

This partnership is one that even the youngest child observes as the parents take interest in what he or she learned in Sunday school. Signing children up for Bible Camp and singing the songs they learned with them encourages a positive spirit in learning about God. Sunday School, Bible Camp—so many great opportunities exist for a young child to engage in even before he or she goes to school.

One mother of an eighth-grade son commented, “Experiencing the sacraments through my son has been a wonderful thing for me. I feel that the programs are much better today than when I was growing up. I remember memorizing prayers and not really understanding what was really going on. My son has service hours and events surrounding Confirmation that are so neat. I feel that he is living the sacrament. The teachers are asking much more of the parents today too.”

It is never too early to start thinking about the future choice of educational partnership for your son or daughter. The parent of a young child should consider the avenue that best suits his or her family. Does a Catholic school fit into the financial budget? Will your child need special assistance from a public school? Does a CCD program work better for your children? This decision should be one upon which both parents agree.

Finally, parental involvement in the community is an education in and of itself! The young child who sees his mother

or father volunteering at parish functions and participating in the liturgy as an usher or a Eucharistic Minister is learning about community.

15 Celebration of the Mass With Your Child

“Our weekly liturgy is called Eucharist, a word that means thanksgiving. The actions we do there, the blessing and sharing of bread and wine, is a gathering of what our lives have been and the strength for new living. The giving of thanks that happens over the gifts of bread and wine is the very shape of our Christian life.”

GABE HUCK

THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY is, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life.” Nevertheless, the liturgy of the Mass is usually planned for adult participants, and there is no way a small child can fully understand its meaning.

This raises a practical question: Should you take your child to Mass or not? You may feel that it is better to leave your child in someone else’s care. Or you may enroll him or her in a preschool class that meets during Mass. Or you and your spouse may take turns going to church while one of you stays home with your child. These alternatives are worth considering; each option has its pros and cons. If you and your spouse go to Mass at separate times, you miss an opportunity to worship together, to share your sacrament of marriage with the community. If you leave your child with someone else, he may feel left out of something he senses is a special time for you, and he may resent your going to church without him.

Ways to Make Church an Experience of Love

If you include your child in the Eucharistic celebration, make it as meaningful an expression as possible. If Mass is an unpleasant experience for a small child, it can be harmful to the child’s developing attitudes toward religion.

The most important thing your child can experience in church is love. We come together in Eucharist to celebrate God’s love for us. Your child learns about God’s love through your love, which she sees and feels. This love, ever present, should be communicated very clearly in church, God’s place.

To many small children the experience of going to church means reminders to sit still, threats of punishment, scowls and angry looks—sometimes even shakes, pokes, and slaps. It

should be no surprise that children who endure such experiences do not look forward to going to church.

This does not mean that children must be allowed to do as they please in church, distracting their parents, the celebrant, and others in the worship community. Children need to learn to behave appropriately at Mass, but there are loving and gentle ways to do this. There are ways to make going to church a meaningful experience that your child will look forward to. Here are a few suggestions.

- First of all, do not expect adult behavior from your child. Activities such as kneeling for long periods, or listening to the homily from beginning to end, are unreasonable expectations of a small child. Try to put yourself in your child's place. A child may not be able to see over the top of the pew when kneeling, or see anything but people's backs unless you hold the child or sit close to the altar. A child may be afraid to stay in the pew alone at communion time.

- Use positive kinds of interaction to help your child act appropriately. Let Christ's love flow. For example, give a hug instead of a swat if your child is restless. Cuddle him on your lap as you listen to the homily. Touch your lips or remind him to whisper instead of saying "Be quiet!" Your gentle touch can calm more surely than a threat.

- At special times say "I need to listen to Father's words" or "I want to talk to God." Teach with love rather than fear.

- Choose appropriate distractions. Call his attention to a statue, a banner, etc. Let him bring a book or a stuffed animal with him. Paraphrase the gospel or a prayer. Explain the message of the homily.

- Call attention to highlights of the Mass. Have your child watch for the presentation of the gifts or listen for the bells at

the Gloria or other festive moments. Encourage the child to sing the “Amen” or “Alleluia.” Share the sign of peace and help your child do the same with others.

Some communities today hold a children’s liturgy during which young children leave the families during the Liturgy of the Word. Lay ministers will read the gospel and speak to the children on their level regarding the message of the gospel. Other communities encourage the children to bring the family’s offertory envelope up to the altar during the time of offertory collection. All of these measures positively include children in the Mass.

- Make sure you let your child know what you like about his or her behavior in church. Words such as “You tried really hard to be quiet” or “I’m glad you sang Holy, Holy” are better than “You were good” (or “You were bad”).

You may feel you are giving up an important part of your own worship experience when you take time to make the Mass meaningful to your child. But teaching your child about God is part of your vocation as a parent. God has called you to be a mother or father. For a few years at least, your uninterrupted participation in the Eucharistic celebration may be as difficult to achieve as windows without fingerprints on them!

Remember, too, that liturgy is community prayer, not private prayer, and that your child is part of that community. When you are reaching out in love to someone else as part of celebration your prayer may take a different form, but it is not diminished.

There may be times when your child will not respond to your best efforts. Then you must let him know that he has no right to disrupt the worship of others. If his behavior goes beyond acceptable limits and positive alternatives fail,

you may need to get up and leave or discipline your child. Alternatives such as these are discussed in the chapter on discipline on pages 80-86. The focus here is on positive methods to help your child value going to church. If it is a loving experience, your child will want to do whatever is necessary to be included.

16 Inter-Church and Interfaith Families

*Robin told her friend Julie,
"My dad isn't Catholic, but my mom loves him anyway."*

MANY PEOPLE TODAY are married to persons of different faiths. The success of these marriages, as well as the religious development of the children in these families, depends on how husbands and wives respond to their faith differences.

Faith differences can occur even in marriages where both partners belong to the same faith tradition. Some Catholics, for example, are more active in practicing their faith than others. One spouse may go to daily Mass, the other occasionally on Sunday. The ways in which they express their spiritual commitment may not agree; one spouse may prefer a traditional approach while the other has a liberal approach to Church practice and teaching.

Issues such as these can cause tension and conflict in a marriage, making the children's faith development a difficult matter. But there are also similarities: feelings and viewpoints that spouses share in common.