

INTRODUCTION

Parents Matter Most

In his book *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation*, Christian Smith says, “the single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents.” This can be daunting if read as an accusation, but it’s empowering if you accept the invitation to walk with your children on their faith journey.

You’ve got this! You are already forming your children in faith. If you are holding this book, I imagine you have prayed for your child, and perhaps *with* your child. You are already showing your child what it looks like to love one another, to sacrifice for another, to forgive and heal one another—all things Jesus modeled for us. You are teaching your child



day in and day out what it looks like to be a Christ-follower, with or without the faith language. Research tells us these are the things that have the greatest impact on the faith formation of children: faith practices and faith conversations.

The Church and research both assert, “Parents matter most.” The Church believes that the family “is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world” (*Follow the Way of Love*, USCCB). The Church further claims that “the ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is *original and irreplaceable*” (#53, *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II).

YOU matter most! During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people’s experience of faith formation took place primarily in their homes. Parishes were closed. Faith formation programs were put on hold. All of a sudden, parents were entirely responsible for forming their child in faith: watching Mass on TV and computer screens and teaching their children what was happening in the Mass; creating sacred prayer spaces and praying in the home; learning about and celebrating the Catholic faith through the seasons and sacraments—at home.

What a great time to celebrate the home church! The Church has long called the family “the domestic church,” a term that dates back to the first century AD.

Family: The Home Church

The home is where faith meets life! The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason, the Church says, the family home is rightly called the domestic church, a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity (#1666, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

The family is a proclamation of faith in that it is the natural place in which faith can be lived in a simple and spontaneous manner. It “has an unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values. On this human base, Christian initiation is more profound: the awakening of the sense of God; the first steps in prayer; education of

the moral conscience; formation in the Christian sense of human love, understood as a reflection of the love of God the Father, the Creator.” (#227, *Directory for Catechesis*)

Simple and spontaneous ways! That’s how we live our faith. Often, we don’t intentionally use faith language. It happens in moments. In seasons. Through a sacramental kind of living that just is, that maybe we’ve paid little attention to, but that is powerful and transformative. Here, I hope to affirm what you’re already doing and offer ideas on how we shape our children’s faith through faith practices and faith conversations.

How to Use This Book

If faith conversations and faith practices have the greatest impact on a child’s faith formation, then how might we infuse these things into daily life? In simple and spontaneous ways! The ideas in this book are meant to be implemented wherever and whenever they fit into your life. Some ideas work better for younger children, and some are better for teens. All are meant to be natural and organic ways to open our families more to the grace of God every day. You will find discussion starters scattered throughout the faith practices in an effort to encourage faith conversations.

Choose a faith practice according to your own spirituality, your family’s schedule, or your children’s ages. Do what works for your family! Make it meaningful, or fun, or silly, or whatever the moment calls for.

FAITH PRACTICES

Wonder, Curiosity, Awe

Cultivate a sense of wonder in your children (and reawaken your own). “Why?” “What if...?” are questions children often ask. Nurture that in your child. A healthy sense of wonder can help us build a posture that is always open to God’s presence in our world.

In his book *The Wonder Switch*, Harris III says wonder is what gives us permission to believe: “Wonder is the childlike state we find ourselves in when we are awake to possibility and rescued from the ordinary, granting us permission to believe in what we have yet to see.” Wonder is often tied to awe. When we are focused on our children’s curiosity, our own wonder can be reawakened. This reciprocal practice can be beneficial to developing and maintaining healthy parent–child relationships. Try some of the following activities to cultivate a sense of wonder in your child and reawaken your own.

Go for a prayer walk in nature. Notice all the sights, sounds, and scents as you walk. Spot the plants, the animals, the hills, the bodies of water. Wonder about the particular qualities of each of these along your path or in your neighborhood. Be sure to give praise to God for all of creation and give thanks to God for your shared experience.

Go for a prayer walk in a city. Wonder at the artists who created the murals on building sides. Wonder at the skyscrapers and those who dreamed them into being. Think of all the people joined under one roof in those tall high-rises and ponder how God has gifted every one of us. Pray for the people you pass. Pray especially for those you see who are without shelter, without food. Give gratitude for the green spaces that exist in the midst of that city.

Collecting things in nature can also be a great “wonder-increaser.” When my children were young, they loved collecting fall leaves and doing pencil impressions on paper, as I had done when I was child. We often used the leaves to decorate a fall table with natural items from the outdoors for Thanksgiving.

Engage in other outdoor activities of your childhood that encouraged wonder, activities like cloud watching or rock skipping.

Watch a sunrise or sunset with your child and be amazed by the colors God paints the sky. Perhaps you could extend this experience at home by drawing, coloring, or painting the scene you’ve just witnessed.

Encourage your child’s creativity. Help them see it as a reflection of our own roles as co-creators with God. Affirm them.

When you go on vacation, or visit a new place, help your child notice the ways this place is different. Playing “I Spy” can be a great way to teach this kind of attentiveness. You could also call it “Stop, look, and listen!” Wonder aloud what it would be like to live here.

Let your child’s questions drive your conversation. When we give an answer to a young child (whatever the question), they often follow up with “Why?” Questions are natural as children begin to try to understand the world around them. As best we can, we should encourage this questioning and not put a damper on that curiosity.

We can also encourage curiosity and wonder through a child’s exposure to books and stories. The more children are exposed to stories, the better storytellers they become, using the imagination God gifted them with. “You can’t use up creativity,” Maya Angelou said. “The more you use it, the more you have.”

When my children were young, another favorite place was a children’s museum, where hands-on activities are designed to encourage that

sense of curiosity. These are explorative learning centers. Help children make the connections to the world that God created.

Visit places that cause you to be still and to reflect on this world. Teach your child to practice stillness, even if it is just a few quiet moments (later, that can be extended with practice). Ask your child to quiet themselves, focus on the moment, and listen “inside.” Ask what they notice. This practice can help you and your child appreciate this world and your place in it.

Gratitude

Wonder leads us to gratitude. When we look for the good, the gifts, the grace, we find them. We build a life that lends itself to “pray always,” as St. Paul taught us, when we give thanks and praise to our Creator in our practice of paying attention.

Give thanks together at mealttime. Say grace using the words of a traditional prayer or your own words:

- Say together: “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”
- Or use a short children’s prayer: “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for this food. Amen.”
- Encourage your children to be creative, using their own words or gestures to lead prayer.

Encourage an “attitude of gratitude” every day. Talk about this as an attitude we can all develop, so we might be prone to looking for the positive every day.

Model an “attitude of gratitude.” Teach your child what it looks like to show your thankfulness by using verbal expressions of gratitude each day. Let your children know how grateful you are for them, for their gifts, for all the ways they bring joy and goodness to the world.

Encourage each family member to keep a gratitude journal. You might design the journal according to the age of your child. Young ones can draw something they are grateful for that day (or that week). A child who is able to write in sentences could express three things they are grateful for this day. And if your child is a teen, you might ask them to write a short reflection (a couple of sentences) each day to name what they are grateful for today.

Instead of individual gratitude journals, you might ***keep a gratitude jar on the kitchen counter or on the dining table.*** Everyone could contribute prayers of gratitude throughout the day. Then name and lift up those prayers each evening.

Make sure to notice blessings that are not just physical or material in nature. Give thanks for family time, for extra sleep on Saturday morning, for a friend who stops by to help out. Help your children recognize the need to give back, to serve others in return for our gratitude for our blessings. This might take the form of volunteering together or participating in a neighborhood project as a family.

Teach your children the importance of gratitude by sitting with them to write thank you notes/cards to someone who has given them a gift or to someone who did something special for them. This is a good practice that often helps build healthy relationships with those close to your family too!

Celebrate the good moments, in the moment, by offering thanks to God immediately. It can be something as simple as “Thank you, God, for....”

When my kids were teenagers, we went on a mission trip with our church each summer. As part of these experiences, we would often engage in affirmations at some point during the trip. Each young person hung an envelope somewhere in our common space. As we recognized positive actions, virtues, and so on, we wrote notes of appreciation to that person.