

Catholic

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Building a Christ-centered Family

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Through our ministry, the Messy Family Project, we meet families from all over the United States and other parts of the world. We get asked the question again and again, “How can we be sure that our children will embrace the faith?” Our answer is always: “You can’t.”

The fact is, we parents have been tasked by God to shepherd the souls he has entrusted to our care, but whether our grown children fully participate in the Catholic faith we teach, model, and experience is up to them.

“Work as if everything depends on you. Pray as if everything depends on God” is an expression that certainly applies to parenting! As we fulfill our responsibilities as parents, it is important to recognize that we are not in control.

But what families *can* do is to live for purpose, not just for pleasure. Living for pleasure tends to embrace a “right now” mentality, whereas living with purpose happens outside of time. A family living for pleasure is driven by the urgent, by what is right in front of them: things like shuttling children between activities, meeting deadlines at work, or throwing yourself into the activity of the day. Living for pleasure can exhaust parents to the point that when they have a moment of down time, they collapse or try to escape by immersing themselves into the world of screens. This type of living doesn’t allow families to build much or move toward a goal, a purpose.

Families who live with purpose are not driven just by what is urgent but also by what is important. They live with intention. They have a vision, an image of what they want their family to look like, and they take intentional steps to foster such a family. They aren’t managing children; they are raising adults.

The question is, what kind of family are you?

This question is vital for all parents to answer because when it comes to forming the spiritual lives of our children, no one is more important to children than parents.

“The definitive causal agents in the religious and spiritual outcomes of American youth are neither clergy nor youth ministers, neither educators nor the voices of popular culture and media, but parents,” states the 2019 Report on American Catholic Religious Parenting from the McGrath Institute.

Parents have more power and influence over their children than they might realize, but it’s important for parents to ask themselves: Are we using it well? Parents, before you answer, remember, this role has not been given to you because you do it perfectly. God has bestowed this vital task upon you because it is your path to holiness.

The first and probably most important step for parents to take in becoming a family of purpose is to embrace the process of personal ongoing conversion. The children can help. We often tell parents that their job as parents is not to make their children into saints. Rather, it’s our children’s job to make us into saints! And children are very good at “saint-making” because the vocation of marriage and family life is naturally designed to give parents opportunities for self-sacrifice.

We have a choice in how we respond to these opportunities. Do we resent them or embrace them as a chance for ongoing

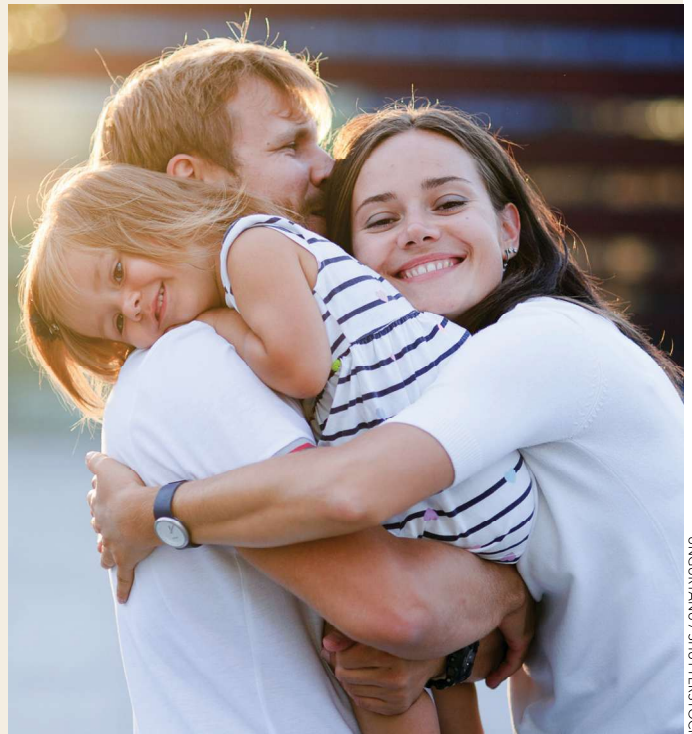
conversion? If we opt for continual conversion, we can better achieve one of our goals, which is not to survive parenting but to strive to become a saint through it!

In his great *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II tells us, “... Parental love is called to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God, ‘from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named’” (FC 14).

Parents are the first images of God for their children. What an awesome responsibility—one that parents must accept with humility and sincerity. Moreover, parents are charged to become like windows that let the light of God shine through them so their children can see God clearly and engage with the faith.

It’s important to understand that passing on the faith is a daily activity, one that doesn’t happen only when you bring your children to Mass or say grace before meals. It is so much more than that! When you read with your children, wrestle with them, review their homework, or even discuss their day, you are passing on the faith.

**If you want to build a life of faith
in your home, love God first.
Second, love your spouse.
Third, love your children.**



By building a relationship with our children and showing them love and care, we are showing them the love of God. And one of the amazing things about being a parent is that as we intentionally provide imagery of God's love to our children, we somehow become more aware of God's love for us.

When our first child, Katie, was born, Mike was up one night holding her as she fussed, trying to sooth her back to sleep. As she calmed down, he spent time just looking at her and thought: *Why do I love this little child so much? We feed her, clothe her, stay up at night with her, and in thanks, all she does is spit up on us, fill up her diaper, and cry! But yet, I would lay my life down for her in a second.* Then he felt in his heart the Lord saying clearly, "Now, my son, you have a glimmer of how much I love you." A profound experience of God's love occurred in Mike as he embraced his role as a father.

An important part of creating the imagery of God's love is acting as a team with your spouse. Pope Francis reiterates this in *Amoris Laetitia*: Mothers and fathers "show their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord" (AL 172).

Each parent has a unique spiritual role and different gifts and ways of presenting God to their children. Broadly speaking, mothers make the Trinity's active receptivity and inward dimension visible, while fathers make visible the Trinity's active power, the initiating, outward dimension. Children need both. You can see this in their responses: infants learn from their mother how to respond to love and how to grow a healthy interior life, but the growing child needs the father to usher them into the world and become active in it.

God didn't intend for men or women to provide these skills separately. Children need the unity of their parents, their "couple love," to have a sure foundation to receive and believe in the love God has for them.

The grace to be a parent flows from the sacrament of matrimony, and that sacrament needs to be renewed and refreshed continually. So if you want to build a life of faith in your home, love God first. Second, love your spouse. Third, love your children.

Once we lay the foundation of love and relationships in our home, how can we teach and experience the faith with our children in a practical way? As Catholics, we are blessed to have many things we can do to create "Catholic muscle memory." Habits, routines, rituals, and traditions that we establish in childhood can keep children connected to the family and to the faith even as they enter adulthood.

For example, Sundays are a day to go to Mass, but also to reconnect as a family. Have a special meal together on Saturday night or Sunday, whether it's brunch or dinner, and pray a special Sunday blessing beforehand. Celebrate seasons and feast days with special prayers, home decorations, food, and even activities to do as a family. These are reminders of our seasons of life and sanctify our daily living. It gives texture and emotion to the year, especially for children.

School, friends, and troubles may come and go, but we prepare for Christ's birth and celebrate Easter every year, just like spring and fall. Find devotions that speak to your own family, like enthroning the Sacred Heart, crowning our Lady in May, or celebrating the patron saints of your family.

Some powerful tools are available to parents to help them nurture their child's relationship with God:

The first is the Word of God in the Holy Bible.

The Word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword..." (Hebrews 4:12).

Introducing our children to the Scriptures and teaching them how to read God's word and listen to how he speaks to us is a powerful tool in the hands of parents.



The second is the Eucharist.

Bring your children to Mass, bring them to adoration, teach them that Jesus is present not just in their heart but also in the tabernacles found in every church in the world.

If your children love Christ in the Eucharist, they will never leave the Church, because like the apostles they will say, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The third tool is joy.

Be joyful because you have the Lord in your life! If your Catholic faith doesn't make you happy, why should it be attractive to your children? If they see that your Catholicism makes you angry, critical, or tired and busy from all sorts of religious "stuff," it's not likely they will want to follow your lead.

The ups and downs, tragedies and triumphs that are all part of family life should be seen as our path to heaven.

This is a fruitful way to make sense of hardship, but it is also a foundational principle we should embrace as we make decisions for our kids.

We need to act in a way that shows we recognize that the souls of our children are more important than their bodies, minds, feelings, or gifts/talents. See your family through the eyes of faith and make the choice to be joyful no matter what life sends your way.

Whenever possible and as much as you are able, participate in daily Mass, pray the rosary, and take part in eucharistic adoration....Yes, all the “stuff” of living as a Catholic. All are powerful tools that you can share with your children so they can use them as they grow. Study the Bible together, go on pilgrimage together, memorize prayers or litanies, sing hymns, and join in ministry with other Catholics in your parish.

One of the most important elements to employ in developing this Catholic “muscle memory” in your children is to have a routine of family prayer every day. This can include grace before meals, nighttime prayers, and/or a daily rosary. Whatever you choose, have some time together as a family every day when you are connecting to God. Understand, this may need to be redefined with each season of family life, since praying with small children is different from praying with teens.

As a couple, we have found that praying with young children takes a special sensitivity. We believe one thing parents must realize is that although young children will not always remember what you say during prayer time, they will remember how they felt. So if prayer time ends with tears, punishments, and frustration on all sides, consider how you can adapt your prayer ritual to better serve the needs of your children.

Sometimes it’s as simple as shortening a prayer or making it more interactive. You may want to couple prayer with dessert, a book, or a game. Some may think this is bribery, but these small rewards will link a positive desirable experience with coming before the Lord as a family. As adults, if your kids recall they prayed the Our Father every night with the family and then ate ice cream, they will have a precious memory to draw upon as they mature.

All of our devotions as Catholics should center on one purpose: to further our relationship with Christ, the Good Shepherd, who leads us to God the Father. Children need Jesus and a relationship with him, because only Christ can satisfy the deepest longings of their hearts. Help your children cherish the basic scriptural truth that they were first created good in God’s image, but like all humanity, they are capable of sin and destruction to their loving relationship with God.

Likewise, your children would do well to cherish the conviction that God never gave up on us. He sent us his Son, who was willing to pay the price for our sins so we can belong to God our Father in a special way. That is why we live as Catholics, it is why we participate in the sacraments, and it is why we are so grateful to God for all he does for us.

As children grow, let them know they can choose to follow Christ or reject him, and that’s terrifying! Remind them that God and you will love them either

way, but that choice is real, and it is made continuously each day.

Parents can choose to adopt the idea that children can make faith decisions for themselves when they are older. That’s true. Children have free will, too. But Catholic parents have the responsibility to create an environment that encourages and promotes choosing Christ. If parents provide this foundation, the good news for them is that even if their children fall away from God and the Church, the kids—at any age—can look to that foundation, repent, and return to Christ. We have to trust in Christ’s provision for them and that his love for them is even greater than our own.

To build a family centered on Christ, we must love God, love our spouse, love our children, pray for them, and keep our eyes fixed on him while rejoicing in his plan.

Alicia Hernon and her husband, Michael, founded the Messy Family Project, a ministry that gives advice and encouragement to parents in order to spark a conversation between spouses on how to be the best parents for their children. Their podcast reaches more than 25,000 families each month, and their downloadable guides and online courses have helped families all over the globe to embrace their sacred calling.

The good news for parents is that even if children fall away from God, they can look to the foundation they learned, repent, and return to Christ.



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