

Teaching the Way of Love

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Is Your Family a School of Prayer?

The title of this article may stop you in your tracks. As a parent, were you even aware that your family is supposed to be a school of prayer? In his general audience for January 4th, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI gives us a beautiful reflection that explains the importance of developing a family prayer life. He reminds us, “The family is the domestic Church and must be the first school of prayer. . . *if one does not learn how to pray in the family it will later be difficult to bridge this gap.*” The Church calls the family the “school of prayer” because children learn how to pray by praying with the family. Pope Benedict shows us what God wants us to do as a family. But as we all know, there is a wide gap between what we should do and what we actually do.



I recently had a mother from my parish ask me, “Why is it so difficult to get my kids to pray?” She proceeded to describe how her children, who range from a 3-year-old to a college-aged young adult, can be sitting in the living room talking or doing homework, but as soon as she mentions prayer they get up to leave, start complaining, or start fighting with each other. “What is it about prayer that brings out the worst in them?” This faithful Catholic was trying her best to create an environment of faith within her home. I was able to share with her that my family is not much different. Even our daughter, who enjoys going to Mass and learning the Catholic Faith, complains about family prayer time. I told the mother to keep in mind that prayer time with one’s children doesn’t have to be “successful” in our own minds in order to allow the Holy Spirit to bear fruit in their hearts.

To be a school of prayer means introducing your children to the person of Jesus and to the discipline of prayer. It doesn’t mean teaching your children to pray the same way that you pray. You’ve had your entire life to increase your mental focus and to mature in your prayer style. Sometimes, parents have to set aside their own vision of what family prayer looks like and meet their children where they’re at. Your goal is simply to lift the minds and hearts of your family to God.

This was a difficult lesson for me to learn as an idealistic theology teacher. I have heard many other parents struggle with it as well. However, some families have really mastered the art of meeting their children where they’re at. One family with young children allowed their children to make up a song that they use for prayer. The song doesn’t really make much sense, but it’s fun, it proclaims love for Jesus, and it asks for blessings on everyone in the family (including a few stuffed animals and dolls). The family holds hands, sings the song, and dances in a circle. Some people might criticize such a practice for not showing children the seriousness of prayer. But I have come to realize that this family is teaching the children something far more important - to come to Jesus every night and celebrate being a family with Him.

Families with teenagers often have an even greater challenge. It's common for adolescents to isolate themselves from the family and avoid formal (i.e. stuffy and boring) family events. Their aversion to family prayer doesn't necessarily indicate an aversion to God. It may simply be an expression of their desire to do things their own way. The solution will really depend on your child. Some adolescents respond well to leadership roles. If you have younger children, ask your teenage children to help the younger ones with their prayers. Ask your teen to set up the prayer space, choose a scripture verse to read, find a prayer to share with the family, or lead a spontaneous prayer. If your older children don't respond to leadership roles and resist coming to prayer at all, find simple ways to incorporate prayer into your day. Even the most sour-faced adolescent can stand still for a quick morning offering and a blessing before everyone heads out the door in the morning. Bless them again before they go to bed.

The key to making your family a "school of prayer" is to show your children how to lift their hearts and minds to God. If you're able to sit your family down for thirty minutes of focused prayer time, consider yourself blessed, and by all means do it! There is a benefit to some degree in requiring children to learn a discipline that they resist learning. But if you find your family struggling so much that the effort seems more damaging than helpful, don't force it. Meet your children where they're at.

One last point before ending is this: Children who see their parents joyfully pray are the most likely to develop a personal prayer life. Let your sons and daughters see and hear you pray. Let them see your reverence in the Holy Mass. Give your family opportunities to observe you in silent reflection, away from your mobile devices and media. Expose them to the various forms of prayer you enjoy and encourage them to explore them on their own. Studies have shown that the role of the father as the spiritual leader of the family is very real and very important. If the father has a strong relationship with God and is vibrant in his example, his children are more likely to be attracted to the faith as adults. More powerful still is the witness and example of a husband and wife working together to lift the hearts and minds of the family to God. When you have regular conversations with Jesus, you are building the foundation for your family's "school of prayer."



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