

The Catechetical Review

October - December 2018

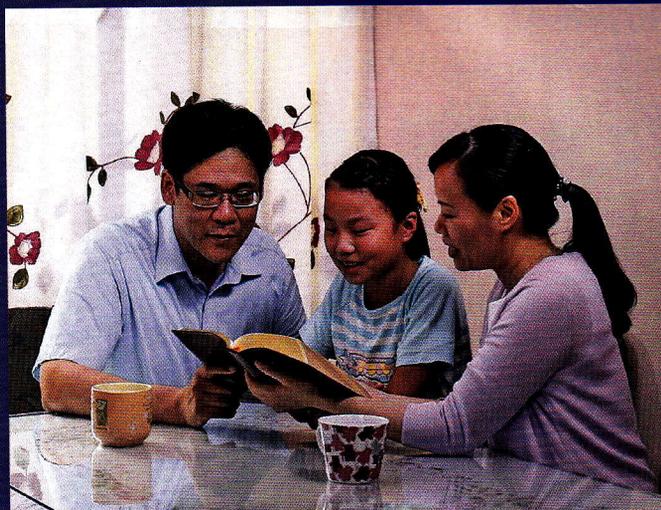
Communicating Christ for a New Evangelization

PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT



Forming a Culture of Prayer within the Home • Sr. Patricia M. McCormack, IHM

Spanish translation available at Review.Catechetics.com



Forming a Culture of Prayer within the Home

By Sr. Patricia M. McCormack, IHM

What do you remember of your first day of Grade One? My memory gave prophetic purpose and life-long value to my life! After taking roll and assigning seats to her 120 students (not a typographical error!), petite Sister St. Rose announced that our first lesson would be the most important lesson of our lives. She distributed our first catechism book and directed us to lesson one. With pencil in hand, we circled question numbers one, two, and three. Sister instructed us in the meaning of the words and told us to have our parents teach us how to say the words with our eyes closed.

My mother proctored homework time. She amazed me when, without looking at the book, she knew the answers to the three questions. More amazing yet was dinner conversation that night. Mom said, "Pat, tell dad what you learned at school today." I looked my dad straight in the eye and declared with conviction, "I learned why God made me." Without skipping a beat my father proclaimed, "Pat, God made you to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in the next." Dad's reply had an exponential influence because he had justly earned the nickname of "Daddy Old Bad Boy." Dad's misbehaviors were legendary and yearly Santa Claus deposited coal in his stocking because of it. So, when *this* man knew why God made me, I embraced the belief hook, line, and sinker! Echoing the sentiment of Robert Frost¹, "that has made all the difference."

Coming to know God—and growing in that knowledge and experience over time—is our universal call, our primary vocation. Knowledge of God and the ways of God leads to love. A person who does not love God does not know God! And whenever any of us love another person we can't help but overflow into service for them.

Prayer: Both Action and Attitude

As "First Heralds of the Gospel"² parents bear the privilege and the responsibility to introduce their children to God; to sensitize them to recognize the ways of God; to learn how to speak to God; to distinguish God's voice and will from other voices; and to respond to God in age-appropriate ways. Prayer is the common thread for these goals.

What is prayer? Definitions abound. Even *Wikipedia* weighs in on the topic. My core definition, and one that I offer to contemporary parents, comes from that same first grade catechism: "Prayer is the lifting of our minds and hearts to God." Prayer can be vocal or mental, formal or informal, private or corporate, scheduled or spontaneous. Prayer changes through the ages and stages of one's life, just as the quality and style of communication changes over time between persons who are growing in relationship.

Prayer is communication with the One who knows us better than we know ourselves and Who loves us beyond our ability to comprehend such love. Consistently God communicates God's love and life-giving will, though we are frequently unaware or inattentive. Often the busyness of life blocks recognition of God's movements. The noises of our environment drown out the whispers of God's love. Regardless of our awareness, God continues to speak, to reach out, and to offer friendship.

Prayer is both an action and an attitude. Any person, place, stimulus, or event that lifts our minds and hearts to God can be a catalyst of prayer. Spiritual practices that are understood and faithfully embraced raise our spiritual consciousness. Environments, customs, and rituals that tutor the soul or recall God's presence can stir holy desire and affection.

Contemporary Prayer Culture

Quite simply, a culture of prayer—understood and embraced—nurtures an intimate relationship with God. By *culture* I mean a set of accumulated habits, beliefs, values, attitudes, norms, customs, and behaviors that are passed along by communication and imitation. Within the context of this article, a culture of prayer is the total set of the learned activities of a people of faith. In times past, the Catholic culture was well-defined and actively practiced. Since Vatican Council II, we've seen a decline, or some would even say a lacuna (void).

Prior to Vatican II, the Catholic culture of prayer included numerous activities and practices: **rituals**, like blessing yourself with holy water upon entering a room, pausing at the sound of the Angelus bells rung three times a day, genuflection to reverence the Blessed Sacrament, double-knee genuflection when the Monstrance was displayed, and regular, often weekly, participation in the sacrament of Penance; **customs**, like seasonal fasts, stationary Holy Days, Corpus Christi procession, Forty Hours devotion, May procession, or purple draped statues, icons and sacred images during Lent; and time-honored **prayer forms**, like Eucharistic adoration, stations of the cross, or novenas. These kinds of spiritual expressions, as well as the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, were core to Pre-Vatican II spirituality. They contributed to a culture of prayer. Though predominately church-centered and communal in nature, some elements of this culture of prayer also influenced actions or attitudes within the family home.

Parents or grandparents, teachers, and catechists born after 1960 do not know *this* culture. They matriculated through religious education classes at a time that these kinds of activities were no longer common experience. Their curriculum and catechesis focused on Catholic Social Teaching, Scripture, and reforms in liturgy and the sacraments. Rather than exerting an intentional effort to blend the perennial values from the historical prayer culture with the necessary focus of Vatican II's goals, unintentionally the traditional culture was deleted rather than adapted. Today we recognize a need to restore or to introduce new practices that integrate faith within daily family life.

Before proceeding, a word of caution is advised! Re-introducing elements of Catholic prayer culture is not an automatic solution to the spiritual lacuna of today. After all, "back in the day," a person may have observed external rituals or customs and simultaneously lie, cheat, or hurt others. Numerous prison inmates can quote cat-

echism teachings and yet be incarcerated for just cause. Knowing and practicing external observances does not guarantee that we understand the meaning(s) inherent in them and, therefore, does not automatically lead us to the love of God and personal growth. Ideally, a culture of prayer sensitizes us to recognize God's movement in our lives and then to respond by loving God, neighbor, and our true-self—the one and only commandment that Jesus issued (Mt 22: 36-40)!

Evangelize the Family

Pope John Paul II reminded us that "we shall not be saved by a formula but by a **Person**, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you!*"³ Popes Benedict XVI and Francis furthered the call to the New Evangelization. All

three popes urge us to reach out to folks who were baptized, who received Eucharist, who were confirmed, and yet who never experienced the person of Jesus. Many Catholic parents and teachers need evangelization. We are asking them to create a culture of prayer for themselves and their children wherein they might encounter the person of

Jesus; and yet, they have no experience of what that might mean, nor how they might approach that goal.

Pope Francis cited accompaniment as a core characteristic of evangelization.⁴ We have the opportunity to do that by helping parents to create a sense of the sacred within the family home, to establish an ambiance conducive to raising the mind and heart to God, and to participate in practices that might "jump-start" the heart! Parents transmit spiritual heritage/spirituality to their families, not by transforming the home into a religious goods store or museum but by choosing meaningful, tasteful markers, practices, and spiritual disciplines that tutor the soul to know, love, and serve God. I've encountered parents who are quite intentional about creating such a culture for their families. What follows are their ideas. Pick and choose or spin-off these starter-ideas! May they prime the pump of your own creativity.

• ENVIRONMENT

Spiritual reminders of the sacred: crucifixes, a Jesus chair, prayer center, prayer bowl; kitchen table centerpiece with symbols of the liturgical season (like an Advent wreath, Christmas crèche, crown of thorns, hefty nails, family paschal candle, or a Mary-themed table centerpiece); prayer aids, wall hangings, patron saint statues, or a favorite scripture verse above each bedroom door and/or at the family front door . . .

**Parents
transmit spiritual
heritage/spirituality to their
families, not by transforming the home
into a religious goods store or museum but
by choosing meaningful, tasteful markers,
practices, and spiritual disciplines that
tutor the soul to know, love,
and serve God.**

• CUSTOMS

Social habits or practices that "season" family time with the sacred: place the figurine of the Infant Jesus into the Christmas crib; re-consecrate house crucifixes on the feast of the Triumph of the Cross, September 14; use a mini-easel to display spiritual practices, virtues, scripture thoughts, or motivating quotations, and then pick a thought-card randomly and "walk with it" through the day; pose a dinner-time question like, "What is one way that I experienced or needed to experience God today?" Determine ways to celebrate the Triduum days (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday).

• RITUALS

Routines that integrate awareness of God into the ordinary events of the day: a greeting at wake-up time; a blessing at bedtime and when leaving the family home; using gestures like signing the forehead, lips, heart; blessing the house every January 1st; verbalizing a prayer/aspiration at the sound of emergency sirens; praying grace before and after meals; marking birthdays with a special blessing; frequently evoking a family mantra like, "God is good, all the time! And all the time, God is good!"

• SACRAMENTAL LIFE & EUCHARISTIC PRACTICES

In addition to Sunday Eucharist, what special occasions are celebrated annually by family participation at Mass or a sacrament and pairing it with an enjoyable activity like a meal, picnic, or family service project? For instance, re-dedicate the family to Jesus on Christ the King Sunday; on Corpus Christi Sunday recall each member's First Communion; celebrate the feast of the Nativity of Mary (September 8) with Mass participation followed by visiting a pregnancy shelter or pro-life center, donating baby layette items, and enjoying a birthday cake for dessert; or make a family visit to the Blessed Sacrament during the Forty Hours mission and/or pilgrimage visits to the Holy Thursday Repository of nearby parishes; teach children how to adapt ACTS (Adore, Confess, Thank, Seek) as a prayer exercise during Eucharistic adoration.

Parish Catechetical Leaders (PCLs), Directors of Religious Education (DREs) and Catechists: heed the call to put your gifts of nature and grace at the disposal of families. Join your talents with the professionals and dedicated volunteers of other parishes to orchestrate ways to nurture a culture of prayer within the home (the Domestic Church). Make available resources like *Our Catholic Family*.⁶

Schedule a mini-retreat, an idea-swap session, a multi-generational event, a multi-cultural sharing of prayer customs, a make-and-take workshop, or discussion-sessions based on a series of bulletins or newsletters that focus on ways to create a spiritual culture through each liturgical season.⁵

Add a video feature to your parish website where you demonstrate and advertise ideas for the liturgical seasons. Invite families to submit a photo of their liturgical environment and post a collage on the parish website. ("A picture is worth a thousand words!")

Eventually expand to host a parish-wide carnival-style event where each booth features a different element (environment, custom, ritual, sacramental life) of a particular liturgical season (Ordinary Time, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Pentecost). For each table engage parish parents, or groups of parents, to prepare its display(s).

Organize a committee of parents to plan, design, and create a "starter box" to gift to each wedding couple or to celebrate the baptism of their first child. In it include something to "mark" each of the liturgical seasons. My dream starter box would include six items: (1) Advent wreath makings, (2) a paper summary of the Courts of the Infant King, (3) a crown of thorns with three nails, (4) a miniature easel to display theme-posts, (5) definition cards of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit for Eastertime use, and (6) a set of picture-cards for each of the mysteries of the Rosary to display during May, October, and on Marian feast days. What would you include in your box? Dream big!

It has been my experience that most folks can adapt or tailor ideas to fit their own circumstances; that all they need is a starter-idea, an example. It is a catechist's privilege to introduce the concept of creating a God-centered ambiance in the home and to expose parents to the kinds of spiritual practices that likely incorporate that sense of the sacred. What a gracious way to be agents of accompaniment and evangelization!

Sr. Pat McCormack, IHM, EdD is Program Director of the IHM Office of Formative Support for Parents and Teachers, Philadelphia, PA. She speaks internationally to a variety of audiences and has authored numerous articles and several books. Her work blends Catholic spirituality, psychology, and wisdom gathered from parents, teachers, and students. Reach her at www.ParentTeacherSupport.org or DrPatMcCormack@gmail.com.

NOTES

¹ Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

² John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, art. 39.

³ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, art. 29.

⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 173.

⁵ Sr. Patricia McCormack. *Creating a Spiritual Culture* (A series of newsletters). Available online at <http://www.ParentTeacherSupport.org> > Newsletters > Family Faith > Creating a Spiritual Culture.

⁶ Dzienna, D. and Shahin, G. (2015), *Our Catholic Family*. Twenty-Third Publications. For each Sunday, major feast, and holy day, it offers activities, conversation-starters, and prayer for sharing faith at home.