



# WHOLE-FAMILY EVANGELIZATION

## *Back-Door Evangelizing for Parking Lot Parents*

BY SR. PATRICIA M. MCCORMACK, IHM, EdD

**WHAT DOES THE EXPRESSION *PARKING LOT PARENT* STIR IN YOU?** Who are “parking lot parents”? Why do some parents abdicate their role as “first teacher” and rely on the parish or Catholic school to be the primary faith formators of their children?

At surface level the term might sound offensive. The concept of parents relying on others to form the faith of their children may invite criticism and judgment. But those perceptions are alien to the book, *Engaging the Parking Lot Parent*, which instead expresses legitimate explanations for how the phenomenon came into existence. Furthermore, it offers support and incites compassion for parents who feel inadequate to provide for the faith development of their children.

**Consider the working definition of the term *parking lot parents* to be this:**

“[moms and dads who] are minimally, marginally, or insufficiently involved in the faith formation of their children and who are themselves in need of evangelization” (*Engaging the Parking Lot Parent*, p. 6). They are run-of-the-mill parents who are overwhelmed by life’s demands and doing the best they can with the time and resources they have to provide for their

family. Some parents feel unskilled and inadequate to pass on Church teachings or heritage to their children. The reasons vary but include:

- **Church changes** introduced uncertainty as to what was still Church discipline. Rather than teach their children a concept and have it corrected later by a teacher or catechist, parents choose silence.

- **Formal formation** of some parents was brief and spotty and

perhaps stopped when they were adolescents.

- **Parent religious formation** occurred at a time when many programs were stressing social justice to the exclusion of the other tasks of catechesis such as knowledge of the faith, liturgical education, moral formation, and prayer.

- **Parent formation** was limited to 30 one-hour weekly sessions that automatically restricted the religious curriculum to “bare bones.”

- **Familiarity with Scripture** was not a part of parent formation.

- **Post-Vatican II distinctions** between “conservative” and “liberal” were a source of tension. The reactionary outcome eliminated from the curriculum classic values and rituals that are a rich part of our Catholic heritage. Parents from that era did not experience *Eucharistic devotions* such as adoration, Benediction and Holy Hours; *Marian devotions* such as the rosary, novenas, and May Processions; or *pious practices* such as praying the noontime Angelus, walking the Stations of the Cross, or emphasizing the lives of the saints.

Add in cultural shifts, busy schedules, commitments (and overcommitments), and it is easy to understand why parents might feel frazzled. Liz Lockhart of Marion, Iowa, offered yet another explanation for the “parking lot parent” phenomenon. She wrote:

Parents are willing to abdicate our role as teachers of our children in a variety of areas — sports, academic tutoring, and even hiring people to drive our children to activities when we are too busy to do so. We have no hesitation when it comes to expecting others to

teach our children the Catholic faith, especially if we feel inadequate in our attempts to do so. The danger is forgetting that anything that isn’t modeled in the home probably won’t take root in our children’s lives over the long haul. Furthermore, those “experts” may not know much more than we do. They just are more willing to spend the time to learn it and pass it along.

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE SITUATION?

“Back-door evangelization” is one creative remedy. A front-door approach suggests directly encountering the parent about policy, religious practice, church teaching, tradition, or ritual. But too often that approach puts parents on the defensive and exposes feelings of inadequacy. By “back-door evangelization,” I mean presenting faith to children with parents present, letting the parent absorb the teaching in a vicarious sort of way. Four suggestions to prime the pump of your creativity are: 1) game night; 2) “make and take” events; 3) Eucharistic evenings; and 4) missionary facilitators.

### 1. Plan a parish game night.

Engage a group of catechists to design a game night where multi-generational families and individual parishioners rotate from session to session, by topic or by grade or age level. Each catechist assumes responsibility for one activity. Award points and announce the top performers at the end of the evening. Sample activities include:

## VOCABULARY GAMES —

Student texts include a glossary or dictionary for terms related to the grade-level material. Using simple index cards, place the term on one side and the definition on the other. Use that material to create BINGO, tic-tac-toe, matching quizzes, or Concentration. Sources of such material abound:

- **Fact sheets** copied from end-of-chapter/unit summaries;

- **Catholic trivia** available for free in Religious Education program material and publisher internet sites;

- **Catholic culture** — commandments, Sacraments, saints, rituals/practices such as Stations of the Cross, and mysteries of the Rosary;

- **Details of Catholic disciplines** — holy days of obligation, fast and abstinence rules, and common prayers;

- **Faith characters** from the Hebrew Scriptures, Christian Scriptures, and Church history.

## SCRIPTURE ACTIVITIES

- **Search citations** to complete a quotation.

- **Match vocabulary** words or personal names with descriptions; use the citation as the clue.

- **Act out** a Scripture story and suggest a life lesson.

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**“Parking lot parents” are moms and dads who “are minimally, marginally, or insufficiently involved in the faith formation of their children and who are themselves in need of evangelization.”** (*Engaging the Parking Lot Parent*, p. 6)

- **Pick out** a favorite Scripture verse.

## HEART MESSAGES

— Deliver messages that touch the heart. Follow up with parent-child discussion questions.

- **Inspirational email** “forward”;
- **Child-oriented movie**, cartoon, or YouTube clip;
- **Simple stories** like those in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

## PASSPORT DESTINATIONS

— Create a passport-style booklet with various media tasks to complete over time in the school computer lab or privately via personal electronic devices or home computers (for example, website activities, YouTube clips, DVDs).

## MARY MARATHON EVENT

— Create a day to celebrate Mary or devote one class period per month to focus on Mary activities.

- **Audio-visual** presentations of various apparitions (Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe, Miraculous Medal);
- **Teach the meaning** of the rosary, the rosary prayers, and the mysteries;
- **Introduce the titles** in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary;
- **Learn** the Marian feast days;
- **Review** multicultural representations of Mary.

### 2. Throughout the year, host “make and take” events that focus on the liturgical season.

Weave in simple explanations as families assemble an Advent Wreath; make a set of Jesse Tree symbols; create a Christmas crèche; assemble a Lenten centerpiece of cross, thorn-crown, and nails; work

with wheat and grapes to form a Holy Thursday centerpiece; or make a miniature paschal candle for the Easter season. Provide a simple prayer to accompany each project. Prepare families to create a sacred ambiance and use the prayer daily in the home throughout the specific liturgical season.

“Make and take” can include making a set of picture cards or symbols for 1) mysteries of the rosary; 2) Stations of the Cross; 3) gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit; 4) apparitions of the Blessed Mother; 5) spiritual and corporal works of mercy; or 6) principles of Catholic social teaching. Demonstrate how these cards could be displayed on a miniature easel and placed on the dinner table or some prominent

## Present the faith to children with parents present, letting the parent absorb the teaching.

place in the home, rotating cards daily. Conversation and intentional practices might follow — especially if a family demonstrates a typical scenario.

Some sources for crafts, activities, and ideas to celebrate the liturgical year include:

- *CatholicInspired.com*
- The Catholic Toolbox: Liturgical Year Activities *bit.ly/CatholicToolbox*
- 1000 + Ideas about Catholic Crafts; *Pinterest.com*

### 3. Orchestrate a two-hour Eucharistic evening.

Families

begin in church for an experience of Exposition; rotate through three 15-minute activities; then return to church for an experience of Reposition. The activities might include guided adoration, practices to personalize participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist, and Eucharistic devotions such as making a spiritual Communion or using the acronym ACTS (adore, confess, thank, seek) for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. In an unobtrusive way, explain the vessels, vestments, and actions of the celebrant during Exposition and Reposition. Sample scripts and activities are available in the Family Eucharistic Experience section at *ParentTeacherSupport.org/Family Faith/*. At the conclusion of the event, encourage parents to take their children to make a five- to 10-minute visit to the Blessed Sacrament at the Holy Thursday Repository, during the parish Forty Hours, or for a private adoration period.

**4. Pope Francis has called us to bring the gospel to others rather than waiting for folks to come to us.** Prepare and commission missionary facilitators: adults who will invite a few families into their home or make advance appointments to visit family homes. Within such an intimate setting, the missionary can involve the participants in establishing a sacred environment. With spiritual music playing in the background, form a procession to set a cloth or napkin of the liturgical color, place and light a candle, enthrone the Bible, and lead an invitational prayer. Then the catechist can facilitate and demonstrate a way to pray with the Gospel or provide an experience of family faith-sharing. For instance:

■ **Praying with the Gospel:** Read a Gospel story and ask all members to participate in a creative writing exercise by composing a letter to one character from that story (for example: Zaccheus, the Cannanite woman, Pilate, the paralytic who was lowered through the roof, or the woman caught in adultery). Once finished, exchange letters. Read and underline any issue or idea that pops out. Return the letter to its author. Lead the group as they talk with Jesus about those issues, using “I-we” language.

This same approach can be applied to writing a dialogue between the Gospel character and yourself or continuing the Gospel story by using your imagination to write what happened next. All of these styles of praying with the Gospel involve holy imagination. It may feel like “make believe,” but the Holy Spirit will work through the effort.

■ **Gospel ABCs:** A=attitudes; B=behaviors; C=consequences. After reading a Gospel story, choose to focus on one character. Re-read the Gospel to identify what *attitudes* that character exhibited; what *behaviors* he/she performed because of those attitudes; and what *consequences* evolved from those attitudes and behaviors. Though any individual can use Gospel ABCs for private prayer,

make it a group exercise. Create a separate list for each of the three elements (attitude, behaviors, consequences). Advise families to add to the lists each time they apply Gospel ABCs to a Scripture story. Whether the Gospel character is positive (Mary, Nicodemus, Elizabeth) or negative (Judas, Pilate, the scourging soldiers), the traits that surface will be useful in shaping family character.

Once ABC brainstorming is complete, the missionary then leads the group in personal prayer, suggesting that members use “I-we” language: 1) to talk with Jesus about how they are like a particular Gospel character or desire to cultivate some of that character’s attitudes; 2) to decide what practice they will add to their personality or character in the week ahead; and 3) to determine what help they need from Jesus. The missionary would model his/her prayer.

### A WORD OF CAUTION!

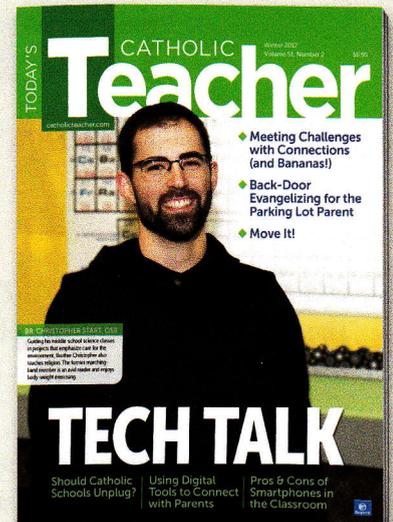
Back-door evangelization is merely a stepping stone. The goal of adult evangelization is adult engagement and accompaniment that leads folks to a personal experience of Jesus Christ. In the words of Dave Cushing, director of Adult Faith Formation in Waterloo, Iowa: “There is a place for parents playing games with their children, but it is not a substitute for genuine engagement with adults as adults. Many adults recognize and resent being manipulated in this way.” **T**

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**Back-door evangelizing provides parents “with opportunities for indirect learning by engaging them in interactions with their child that bring both parent and child into a deeper relationship with Jesus.”**

(Engaging the Parking Lot Parent, p. 17)

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