

# Strategies for Nurturing Family Faith

## John Roberto

We know how important parents and the whole family are in forming the faith of young people. We know that the family is “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*). We know that the primary way by which Christian identity becomes rooted in children’s lives are the day-to-day religious practices of the family and the ways parents model their faith and share it in conversation, collaboration, and exposure to outside religious opportunities (*A Report on American Catholic Religious Parenting*, page 7). Parents are simply the most significant influence on the religious and spiritual outcomes of young people.

The family is the community where Christian faith practices are nurtured and practiced. We have discovered through research that certain faith practices make a significant difference in nurturing the faith of children and adolescents at home. Among the most important practices are:

1. Reading the Bible as a family and encouraging young people to read the Bible regularly
2. Praying together as a family and encouraging young people to pray personally
3. Serving people in need as a family and supporting service activities by young people
4. Participating regularly in Sunday worship as a family
5. Being involved in a faith community and serving in church as a family and as young people
6. Eating together as a family
7. Celebrating rituals and holidays at home
8. Having family conversations
9. Talking about faith, religious issues, and questions and doubts
10. Ritualizing important family moments and milestone experiences
11. Celebrating holidays and church year seasons at home
12. Providing moral instruction

*What approaches can we use to equip and support parents and families in embedding these practices into their daily life so that they become “habits of faith?”* Here are several strategies for nurturing faith practices at home that involve both infusing practices into our current church programming and creating new initiatives to equip and support faith practice at home. We begin with three foundational strategies and then move to more “programmatically” ideas.

1. **Create a digital platform**, using the church website or by building a family faith formation website. To reach parents we need to use digital tools and methods, and a website focused on families is essential today. The website is the resource center and portal (i.e., links to other online resources) for the faith forming content (resources and activities in print, audio, and video) for families to engage in a practice at home. A church can develop a family faith formation website that features each of the faith practices with engaging activities—print, audio, video, apps, and more—tailored to families with young children, older children, young adolescents, older adolescents, and the whole family, including “how to” information and videos for parents.

2. **Provide “how-to” assistance to parents** so they feel confident and competent to engage in faith practices at home with their children and teens. Provide parents with online practical information (print, audio, video) on the practices with actual activities to do at home. One simple way to do this is to create a short video of the children or teens experiencing the practice or activity, and then make it available on the website and/or on a special YouTube channel for your families.
3. **Communicate regularly with parents** using a family email newsletter or texting to highlight activities and videos online. Use social media to reinforce and spread the practice. For example, set up an Instagram account for faith formation and photos of the children and teens engaging in the practice in the program or class; and then invite them to post photos of their family engaging in the practice.
4. **Incorporate faith practices throughout the year** by teaching the practices through experiential activities in children and youth programs, and then inviting parents to reinforce the practice through continued at-home experiences that you provide online for easy access. This strategy can reap huge rewards from childhood through the teen years. Imagine families focusing on one Bible story each month or one prayer practice each month for ten years. What a difference this simple strategy can make. Here are two examples:
  - **Reading the Bible:** Develop the “Bible Story of Month” plan to introduce children and teens to important stories and teachings in the Bible by teaching them the practices for reading, interpreting, praying, and applying the Scriptures to their lives. Select 12 of the most relevant and developmentally appropriate Bible stories for each age—from age 5 to 18. Integrate the Bible teaching into one session or program each month; use videos to assist you (Check out the animated videos at The Bible Project: <https://thebibleproject.com> and at Jelly Telly: <https://www.jellytelly.com>). Then provide online resources for parents to reinforce the Bible story online: reading the story, watching the video, discussing the story. Be sure families of children have a good Bible: *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (ZonderKidz) and *The Catholic Children's Bible* from St. Mary's Press are great resources. Here is another free resource to help: *Reading the Bible – Family Guide and Children's Workbook* from *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Go to: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/faith-formation-in-christian-practices.html>).
  - **Praying:** Develop the prayer life of children, teens, and families by focusing on learning Catholic prayers, teaching the different forms of prayer, and/or experiencing a prayer practice each month during the class or program. Have children and teens experience the different types of prayer: contemplative, Scriptural, intercessory, praise (adoration), and thanksgiving. Develop a short video of the children or teens praying so that parents can see prayer in action. Provide prayer activities and resources online for parents to continue the “prayer of the month” at home. There are excellent online prayer resource to make available to parents. Here is a free resource to help: *Praying – Family Guide and Children's Workbook* from *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Go to: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/faith-formation-in-christian-practices.html>).

5. **Celebrate the seasons of the year** at home by identifying a monthly seasonal event, reflecting the calendar seasons and the church year seasons, and publish the activities on the family website. Incorporate Scripture, prayer, learning, service/action, ritual, and family conversation into each seasonal event. Highlight a Christian practice that will be communicated and experienced through the event. each event, for example:

- January: Martin Luther King Jr. (working for justice and peace, serving)
- February: Valentine’s Day (loving)
- March: Lent (praying, serving/almsgiving, forgiving)
- April: Earth Day (caring for creation)
- May: Mother’s Day (honoring parents, loving caring)
- June: Father’s Day (honoring parents, loving, caring)
- July: Independence Day (working for justice)
- August: Back to school (celebrating new beginnings)
- September: Fall harvest (being grateful, generosity, caring for the earth)
- October: St. Francis (caring for creation, caring for animals, living simply)
- November: Thanksgiving (being grateful, serving, living hospitality)
- December: Advent and Christmas (celebrating rituals, praying, serving)

A church can develop seasonal family festivals and gatherings to support the seasonal plan using the four seasons—fall, winter, spring, and summer—or the church year seasons—Advent-Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost.

6. **Connect families to Sunday worship** by incorporating preparation and/or reflection for Sunday in children and teen programs, and then deepening the Sunday worship experience at home through activities, practices, and resources from a variety of age-appropriate and whole-family digital content on the website. These activities can include: family conversation questions, weekly table ritual, podcast or video of the sermon with a study guide for the parents, children’s creative Bible activities, storybooks, videos presenting the Bible story, daily prayer, and weekly family devotion.
7. **Create family immersion experiences** on faith practices. Design extended time programs (half-day, full day) that teach faith practices through immersion experiences—at church or in the community—where families can experience a practice first hand, such as hospitality at a homeless shelter or serving a meal at a soup kitchen or caring for creation by planting a garden. Combine the at-church experience with activities for families to do at home. Substitute an age group program for a family program or add three or four family programs throughout the year that teach a practice by having the whole family experience it together.
8. **Develop family life skills** by adding a parent-child/teen component to age group faith formation or by adding special parent-child/teen programs throughout the year. Focus on the types of skill-building that will strengthen family life, and parent-child/teen relationships, such as: communicating effectively, discussing tough topics, making decisions and solving problems as a family, learning how to build strong relationships and express care for each other, supporting each other (encouraging and praising, giving feedback, standing up for each other), and treating each

with respect and dignity. Many of these skills can be developed using movies selected for their positive messages. An example of a movie that provides a foundation for follow-up activities is Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* about the emotional life of child growing up.

Over the next year try one or more of these ideas in your church. There's nothing more important in faith formation today than equipping and supporting parents and the whole family in becoming communities of faith practice.

#### Works Cited

*A Report on American Catholic Religious Parenting*. Justin Burkus and Christian Smith. University of Notre Dame, 2017.

*Follow the Way of Love*. United States Catholic Bishops, 1994. (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/follow-the-way-of-love.cfm>)