

Show and tell: Six ways to teach your children the faith

By [Catherine O'Connell-Cahill](#) /

ARTICLE LIFESTYLE

Handing on the faith to one's children is a learn-as-you-go thing.

Often you find your heart in your mouth, like the day you drove off from the hospital with your first baby and thought wildly, "They're letting us take this kid out of here?!" When my husband and I brought our newborn in for checkups during those first weeks, I couldn't shake the notion that I was returning him like a library book, so the doctor could look him over and give us the OK to check him out again for a few more weeks.

I imagine there are parents who don't start out this way, but I don't know any of them.

Many parents likewise find their confidence failing them when they learn the church has proclaimed them their children's "first and foremost educators" in the faith. Our first reaction is often, "Who, me?" Although we may discuss toilet-training methods with complete strangers, we seldom ask others just how they hand on the faith.

Here, then, are six family practices, honed in the everyday whirlwind that is parenthood.

To everything there is a season

Crammed with feast days and whole seasons such as Lent, Advent, Easter, and Christmas, the Catholic Church bursts with delights for the senses: holy water, incense, bells, candles, music, flowers, colors, oil, ashes. Who could ask for more to hold the interest of the young?

A wise person said that Catholics don't keep Lent; rather, Lent keeps Catholics. The practice of our faith is what keeps us faithful. Catholicism invites us to take stock during Lent with prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Kids often want to do some pretty heroic things for Lent: In our family we fast from TV. This means no NCAA March Madness, usually no Oscars. Do I get itchy for TV? You bet. But you can't forget it's Lent, and that's a good thing. Lent is also a great time to begin service projects (visit a nursing home, work in a food pantry) that you may well continue once Lent is over.

Holy Week, contrary to popular belief, can be wonderful for kids. With preparation they appreciate the unique story of these liturgies: footwashing, a procession with the Blessed Sacrament, veneration of the cross, a church bathed in candlelight. The bilingual Easter Vigil at our parish can last four hours, but you can't drag our kids out of there.

Hope De Leon of Arlington Heights, Illinois says that her youngest, at 8, loves the Easter Vigil: "The best part is when the people who are becoming Catholics step into the font with the priest to be baptized. We get to see their faces and hear their gasps as the cold water is poured on their heads. Our reaction as the gathered witnesses is probably not what John the Baptist was looking for, but even with smiles and soft laughter, it is moving and memorable."

Find a living Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. Try visiting seven churches with your kids on Holy Thursday night. Many churches stay open till midnight for prayer—our own chance as disciples to stay awake with the Lord. They'll love it.

Catholic seasons even have a home décor side: Nativity sets, Easter flowers, Mary altars in May. Can visitors to your home (not to mention your kids) see clues that you're followers of Christ?

"Our house features a lot of Catholic and spiritual art and artifacts," says Ted Rosean of Wilmette, Illinois. "None of us really noticed how much until the girls' friends from high school, many of whom are Jewish, came over and commented on it, which of course mortified the girls."

Talk about what you believe

Many of us are struck dumb when our kids ask tough questions. A dad once told me that he found himself unable to answer his young son's question

about why God “took” a beloved aunt who had died. He ended up avoiding the topic and even bedtime prayers with the child for months afterward. Of course, he felt terrible about it.

If tongue-tied, start with, “What do you think?” as you gather your thoughts. Listen to what the child is really asking, and speak from the heart.

If a child wants a TV in his or her bedroom and you know that unsupervised TV watching would do damage to the child, say so, rather than hiding behind, “We can’t afford it.”

If you don’t want to buy your kids clothing from Abercrombie & Fitch because their catalog features young people in various states of undress, tell your kids that—at the very least they’ll respect you for your beliefs.

Don’t duck moral questions. Surveys routinely show that parents have the greatest impact on whether kids engage in premarital sex or other worrisome activities. Yet parents often remain mum.

Why do you not want your seventh-grader to go on dates yet? Why shouldn’t the high school student drink beer or smoke pot? Why would you be disappointed if your fifth-grader teased the class outcast? Find the words. Encourage kids to ponder what God might be calling them to do.

Get kids thinking about topics in the news from a moral standpoint: war, torture, abortion. Discuss them at dinner. Help your kids imagine what it might be like to be in such situations. If you feel you don’t know the teachings of our church on certain issues well enough to represent them to your child, why not learn about them together?

Annemarie Scobey of Milwaukee is the principal writer of *At Home With Our Faith*, the family spirituality newsletter I edit. She describes how she and her husband talk with their kids about “the little miracles or ‘Godincidences’ that make us aware that God is involved. This has taught them that a relationship with God is not about praying for miracles, but rather looking to see when God is there.”

Perhaps toughest of all: Be open about your relationship with God in times of suffering and joy and in between. At meal times and at bedtime, give thanks and ask for God's help (in your own words) alongside your children. Let them see, day in, day out, how you depend on God.

Find some allies

My husband and I invited an old friend, a priest, for dinner the week our firstborn son left for college. He gave our son a handmade ceramic cross from the Holy Land. Then he looked our son in the eye and, in as forceful a tone as I'd ever heard him use, said, "I have just one thing to say to you: Don't lose your faith!"

What a message for a kid going off to college: Someone, besides your predictable old parents, cares passionately whether you practice your faith as you grow up. Allies like this are invaluable. Where to find them? They may be godparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, fellow parishioners, parish priests and staff members, coaches, teachers. Encourage them not to be bashful in talking about faith with your child.

Sandria De Sapio, age 28, of Chicago describes the power of weekly childhood gatherings with her large extended family to pray the rosary for their grandmother, who had cancer: "My grandmother exuded such warmth and love that it seemed impossible to live without her. But in praying together, even at the age of 10, I felt solidarity, comfort, and trust in God and in my family."

Many parents, at significant cost, send their children to Catholic schools to provide both a faith community and a faith perspective all day in school. The benefits extend far beyond religion class: My daughter and son learned about saints from the nun who taught music, about All Souls' Day from the art teacher as they created art to commemorate their dead loved ones. In class, children pray together for relatives in combat or battling cancer. Daily they see the witness of adult men and women who share their faith.

Encourage kids to become altar servers, a major antidote to liturgical boredom. Not only do they get to learn the liturgy up close, but they'll get to know some priests and lay ministers.

It's vital to have adults and kids at the parish who know your child's name, who are glad to see them at Sunday Mass. Can your family invite the pastor over for dinner or out to a restaurant? Our church's sex abuse crisis has taught us to be wiser in protecting our children, but don't let that mean that your child never gets to know a priest or a nun who takes the God questions seriously.

Press play

Last weekend at my daughter's robotics tournament, hundreds of grade-school students sprawled in the hallways of the school killing time. Nearly everyone sat transfixed by a handheld device: MP3 player, cell phone, game system. I noted the complete absence of card games or other communal activities, such as punching one another. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect an adult conspiracy, some nefarious plot to create Stepford kids.

In this new world, how do we create a Catholic culture for our children? By attending to what, and how much, electronic entertainment kids consume: TV, movies, music, video games, Web activity. If you wouldn't invite some of these performers into your living room, why let your child encounter them on TV or in their headphones?

You need your values handy when walking through the media minefield with your kids. When considering a technology purchase, think about whether it will help or hurt family unity. And exactly why do you object to certain things?

Listen to media critic Sister Rose Pacatte, F.S.P. in a 2004 U.S. Catholic interview: "I always ask [parents], 'Articulate the three most important values in your life that guide you individually or as a family.' . . . If you can't articulate your values, how do you communicate them to your kids? Do you just say, 'Not in my house you don't'? . . . You're not giving any reasons for [your] choices regarding media. . . . That doesn't help. Your children will just go out the door to someone else's house, without any skills."

Try instead, "I don't like this show, honey, because it disrespects women," or "I don't think the hero on 24 ought to be torturing people—what do you

think?” How about, “I think it would be better for us to shoot hoops or read a book together than for you to spend two hours every night on the Internet.”

Pitch in

Granted, parents are swimming in service: laundry, shopping, cooking, filling out school forms, all on behalf of our offspring. But children ought not simply receive our service, they should know the world needs their effort, too.

“My parents included us in service,” says Sandria De Sapio. “My mother taught CCD, and I would go along with her to help. My dad helped run the church picnic, and our whole family would be there setting up. It seemed fun, and not work, to lug the Nativity scene out of the rectory basement each Christmas. Naturally, as my brothers and I got older, we began to seek out opportunities of service ourselves.”

Making service a habit early on will help it become an expected part of life. The key is reflecting with your kids on their service in the light of your faith. Service can get kids thinking about the world and why it is the way it is; it leads them toward empathy. You can help them understand why we as Catholics believe that the poor and suffering have to be taken care of first.

We may be tempted to have children do service because “It’s good for their development” or—let’s get real—to add to a child’s “resume” for high school or college. Try this instead: All of us, including kids, have a responsibility for the common good. “We get to heaven on the backs of the poor,” as Chicago’s Cardinal Francis George is fond of saying. That’s why we have the corporal works of mercy. In Matthew’s 25th chapter Jesus says directly that when we feed the hungry or go to a wake or serve the homeless, we actually encounter him.

Make Mass a habit

So it’s Sunday morning. We’ve arrived at the hour in which we are fed by the Word of God and the Bread of Life. In fact, at Mass we find everything else we’ve talked about: celebration, our community, our shared values, the call to

serve others. This is what Catholics mean when they say Eucharist is the “source and summit” of Christian life.

“We rarely skip a Sunday Mass,” writes Annemarie Scobey. “I think going every Sunday—whether we feel like it or not, whether we have time or not—has taught our kids the importance of it. They never complain about going to church. They don’t consider that not going is an option.”

Sandria De Sapio says that attending Mass “sometimes meant being late for a soccer game or dance rehearsal, but it sent a clear message that worshipping together is a priority.”

To keep from portraying Mass as simply a duty, make it clear why you look forward to hearing the gospel, reflecting on your week and offering it to God, singing, praying, sharing with the other members of the Body of Christ. Mass can then be more of a “get to” than a “have to.” You can always sweeten the pot by scheduling fun after-Mass activities: a real Sabbath, with nature, friends, family, recreation.

Try asking your kids what they thought of the Sunday homily. (If they answer, “It was the most boring thing I ever heard!” and you agree, consider saying so. Avoid insincere praise, which they can spot in a minute.) Ask them what they might have said about the gospel if they’d given the homily that day. They might surprise you.

“We try to make the kids understand that our faith has helped us through hard times,” writes Ted Rosean. Several years ago, when a son was going through a rough time, “I told him going to Mass helped me, and he discovered the Newman Center at college, where he went to Mass every day for about a month. I don’t think he’s been back there since, so I guess he’s over it. But I think he’ll remember the experience as a helpful one for when the next storm hits.”

You might get teased, by your kids at least, if you take your faith seriously. Rosean, for one, reports that his kids poke fun at him. And his brother, if you’re old enough to recall the Saturday Night Live skit, calls him “the church lady.” Jesus promised no less.

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