

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The handing on of Christian beliefs and values to children is the most important function of Catholic family life. This task requires a parent to provide authentic spiritual leadership to their children. The challenge is to make real the love of Christ in family life. Children's experience of a family life where faith is taught at home with words and deeds gives credibility to our faith. Children watch what parents do. Parents must grow and nurture their own faith before they can transfer it to their children.

For all this to happen, it is necessary to make family time a priority. Do not let children's activities crowd out family time. If parents let the popular culture shape their children's priorities, children will seek self-gratification. They will lack a sense of responsibility towards others, and only give minimal attention to their Catholic faith. Parents must clearly express what they expect from their children, and explain the religious beliefs which underlie these expectations. These expectations must be grounded in the Christian faith and in Catholic Church teachings. Parents must maintain active participation in a Parish community in order to reinforce the core values being passed on to their children. Parents are responsible to God for doing their best to raise Disciples of Christ, and parishes can help parents accomplish their calling.

Rituals are helpful in creating a Christian family culture. Rituals help children feel part of something larger than themselves. Family rituals offer predictability and order in family life. They provide an identity and a connection to a unique family unit. Rituals demonstrate what is important to the family, and children will hopefully continue rituals as a natural part of family life when they start families of their own. Examples of Christian family rituals are: having prayer time together and family meals together at least several times a week with a prayer before each meal. What is important to parents will often times become important to their children. Is Mass or Church attendance a priority to both parents? Does the family volunteer for periodic Church or community projects? Are there routine visits to grandparents or shut-ins? Is there an occasional family time to acknowledge and rejoice over answered prayers? Have parents explained their commitment to tithing and encouraged their children to give? Have parents researched together with their children a difficult question of faith or a moral issue and then had a discussion? Does Mass attendance supersede children's ball games or other sports, whenever possible? How evident is the effort to find and attend Mass or maintain a ritual like prayer time when on vacation? And, most importantly, are BOTH parents, when both are available, participating in the spiritual formation of their children? It will not do for one parent to stay home while the other goes to Church to pray with the children. Recent research shows that a parent's spiritual leadership is the key element in handing on the faith. Without parental example, religious education will rarely be taken seriously by children.

To provide spiritual leadership to counter the popular culture of shopping and celebrity, parents must explore their own attitudes concerning the ever constant pressures to acquire new material possessions. They must confront the multiple forces influencing their own decisions as consumers as well as their decisions regarding their children's activities. All too frequently, the priority of family life is compromised due to the number of activities parents and children are involved in outside the home. Family life sadly becomes a casualty of busyness and the family loses its soul to shopping, sports, career, etc. Parents need to teach their children to evaluate life according to authentic needs versus wants. Children will learn from, and will likely follow, their parents' priorities.

In summary, the encyclical *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II's letter on Family Life) states that parents are called by God to do their best to form their children so that there is a gradual maturing of their personality as Christians and as active members of the Church. Parents accept this role at the Baptism of their child, and parishes need to be places where parents find strong support. The parent-child relationship is the most critical unit in transferring Christian values.

Conscience formation is gradually developed with this bond of trust between parent and child. It is critical for parents to articulate their own moral standards and to live them out daily. Family rules, conforming to religious beliefs and values, create a beneficial family life for all, mutually supportive and truly loving. The result of the lived experience of Christian family life is fulfilling for all at a deeper level than our sad popular culture can ever provide. I want to stress again that role modeling is crucial for spiritual leadership. Much of what children learn about moral behavior is acquired by observing parents' behavior. Children imitate what they see others doing, especially others with whom they have a strong bond. Children will most likely conform to Christian beliefs and values when there are positive parent-child relationships, when the moral code is clearly communicated, and when consistent positive role modeling is present. Research confirms the important benefits for the family when parents are authentic spiritual leaders. When you provide this leadership, you will know that it is what your children really need more than anything else, and God will bless your efforts.

10 Ways to be a Great Catholic Dad, Cory Busse, Our Sunday Visitor, June 21, 2009
Take Back Your Kids, William Doherty, PhD
Principles of Teaching Family Centered Education, www.familyhonor.org

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