

At HOME with our FAITH

A parent's 10 Commandments for passing on the faith

In the early morning of my godson's baptism, his mom pulled me aside with a question I'll never forget. She wondered—and she wanted the honest truth, as a new Catholic herself—whether I got all I needed growing up Catholic, whether my faith truly made a difference.

We both knew this was a loaded question. As an old friend, I knew she had grown up in an extremely troubled family; she knew I had developed a childhood disease at the age of 6.

"Yes," I said. "It made a difference. Because no matter how much my parents loved me and how many good friends and understanding teachers I had, nobody came close to comprehending what I was going through—except for God." God was my "secret friend" children sometimes have. What a vastly different life I would have had if my family hadn't planted that seed of faith early on, I explained.

I still believe that. A solid sense of God—along with the Catholic supports that reinforce it—is probably the greatest gift you can give a child, aside from your own love and reassurance.

You can't always be there for your kids, but God sure can. Here are 10 ways you can assure that your children feel God's presence in their lives:

1. Celebrate seasons. If your kids are in school, their young lives are already in rhythm with the seasons. Build on

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Tips for celebrating the seasons at home

- **Don't be afraid to adapt established Catholic rituals to be more kid-friendly.** We made up our own simple ritual for the Advent wreath that began with a spirited gospel song and ended with a vivid Bible text, such as, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:1).
- **Keep it simple.** You'll hold kids' attention, and you'll be able to fit it in on busy days.
- **Keep it regular,** at the same time and place, so it becomes a habit even your kids will remember. If you forget, they'll remind you.
- **Progress, not perfection!** Don't beat yourself up for forgetting or skipping some days. While Advent calendars are just the ticket for some, in our family the little unopened doors were nagging reminders of our failure to remember.

that, especially when the commercialism of certain holidays threatens to overshadow the "reason for the season."

And build on the natural needs and rhythms of your own household. I found that in the weeks before Christmas, using

an Advent wreath was the perfect antidote to the season's hectic pace and hype. Its quiet glow in a darkened room did much to quiet my two toddlers before bed and soothe my own frazzled nerves.

2. Teach them a few old prayers.

When I noticed that my own little ones were starting to join me in reciting the words to a favorite book called *Prayer for a Child* (MacMillan), I decided to teach them the Guardian Angel Prayer, especially since they were afraid of going to sleep at night. Though they didn't understand every word, they sure got the message.

When my kids needed to learn the Glory Be, Hail Mary, and Our Father for religious education, I began reciting one of those each night until they were able to chime in themselves. Now we take turns, as one child picks out and leads the prayer that we all recite.

3. Listen to their own

prayers. Memorized prayer is a great warm-up for spontaneous prayer: You'll find the spontaneous often happens on its own as kids raise questions about what they've just heard. Or you can have each child add something personal: What we would like God's help with for ourselves or someone else, and what we thank God for.

Spontaneous prayer is a very tender and helpful way to find out what's in kids' minds and hearts.

4. Picture God's love. Children are visual creatures. Treat them to images of faith that are active, like any number of fine prints that show Jesus welcoming the little children. Someone gave each of my own kids a large, brightly colored Salvadoran cross featuring a risen Jesus with arms outstretched and a lush village scene. They love having them hang

over their beds as reminders of God's protection.

5. Make it to Mass. When you finally have a chance to sleep in, getting



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breakfast-smear kids cleaned up and off to church with you can sound as fun as a traffic jam. But make the effort as often as you can.

Taking your kids to Mass gives them an opportunity to experience a rich and increasingly rare sense of identity, care, and belonging. You can try the family Mass to feel more at home.

6. Get curious. If you're like most Catholics, the last bit of religious instruction you received probably happened back when you were still worrying about acne and prom dates. It's not wise to rely on teenage understandings of Catholicism for the spiritual support you need as a parent.

Look into a lecture that intrigues you, join a retreat for adult Catholics, or pick up one of a whole new breed of bestselling books that make faith an understandable and fascinating read.

7. Show them they can make a difference. The Catholic Church has such a rich legacy of defending and befriending the poor that it has earned the title, "the church of the poor." Plug into this ancient tradition by involving your kids in food drives, special fundraisers, and direct service. Kids love the feeling of having a positive effect on other people's lives. And don't be surprised if this turns out to be their favorite part of Ca-

tholicism in their teenage years.

8. Wonder. Take time out with your family to glory in the wonder of God's creation—be it a perfect starry night or

the way a sprouting little tooth knows how to nudge its way into correct position. Or the way inspiration can come from the places you least expect it.

God's presence is popping out all over if we but know how to see.

9. Remember

saints. Start with the legacy of the saints you've known—dearly departed friends and family members whose examples left a lasting impression. Pull out the

photo album and recall your favorite stories about them. It can be a good family ritual to mark the feast of All Saints on November 1, perhaps by the light of a jack-o'-lantern?

Expand on that to include other saints and heroes, from Martin de Porres to Martin Luther King Jr.

... and the 10th commandment:

Honor thyself. A friend once warned me that as my kids reached certain milestones, bitter-sweet and long-forgotten memories of my own life at the same age could be stirred up. I have found that to be true, and normal.

If memories of your own life resurface and you discover you have "unfinished business"—with the way you were treated in school, with the scary images of God someone gave you, with a father who was rarely home—realize that God is giving you a chance to find healing by changing that history with your own kids. Let it be a reminder that our God is the God of second chances.

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