

How to raise a holy family. Tip number 3 - Spiritual Reading

We've often met couples who love God and have struggled to raise a family, they've maintained the practice of weekly church attendance and even sent their children to private religion-based schools. Yet, to their chagrin, sorrow and frustration the children reach adulthood having chosen paths that do not include adherence to the family faith, often living in ways quite contrary.

So, how can we pass on our faith to the children? How can we explain the many teachings, practices, attitudes, beliefs and world view of our faith without harping? Our family will only encounter so many situations before the children leave our home...how can we prepare them for new situations, for the mind sets they will encounter in high school and college, for situations they will encounter as adults?

We were looking for a solution to these questions. Church alone was not the solution. Although Sunday sermons are often great they are usually not direct regarding specifics; the children need to have generalizations illustrated with tangible real-life situations. The readings and homily can make for good discussion after services, but we needed something more. TV shows and movies were not satisfactory either. TV is a weak medium for formation, as the shows are often a porridge of good, bad and confused messages. We used movies for some aspects of formation, but this medium had limitations too, first, we could not easily review the material beforehand, we had to take it as it came, drink from the firehose so to speak, secondly it was mostly passive. However, it did have the advantage of providing sources of material for thoughtful consideration. And, watching a movie together, say on a Friday night, could provide us a common experience, a memory, which we could refer to between the parents and children.

Then one day, after attending a retreat, a solution occurred to me. It was a variation of a timeless parenting staple, the read aloud...but with a couple twists. Here's how it works, some tips and techniques and the benefits.

Simply put, we select some book that will be excellent to promote growth of spiritual knowledge in the family. (There is a list of some sample books at the end.) Then, each week, at an agreed time, the family members gather in some room of the house and after opening with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, usually led by mom, we begin reading from the book. Usually we start with dad, who checks with everyone that such and such paragraph is where we left off. Then the reader will read a couple pages and pass the book to the next person. We'll continue this way rotating the book around the room until 45 minutes to an hour has passed and then we stop and close with another prayer. It seems too simple..."Wait!...this was the big idea?" Yes, but read on. It seems simple but there is a lot going on here.

First, the dedication of an hour each Sunday to spiritual reading, year in, year out, sends a strong message to the family that we honor the commitment to keep the Sabbath holy. A good parent should never overlook the 'messaging' they are sending out by their habits, plans, attitudes. Parenting must be done intentionally to be effective. It takes thinking and strategy. A good parent will use subliminal messaging to their advantage. Observe what you do, and what message it sends.

Secondly, the very act of coordinating with the family members the time in which to do the spiritual reading creates a requirement for cooperation, order, and often versatility (especially when there are one or more children in high school or sports). We would gather round a white board hung in our hall way and map out the weekend, including Sunday reading. Each of the children's and parent's obligations would be taken into consideration and then mass, meal times, spiritual reading, chores, work, sports and homework slotted in so that all the goals were covered. I'll write more about the white board in another tip.

Thirdly, the children were at different reading levels, so listening to the parents and 'olders' read introduced them to new vocabulary and enunciation. If it was a 'youngers' turn to read, the olders learned patience waiting for the youngers to struggle through a section, but they would clap and encourage them when they managed through a tough section or word. On occasion someone would want to comment on a passage, a short discussion might ensue. Sometimes we were in wonder and awe at the sufferings or tenacity of a person in the story, sometimes moved to tears by the struggles they endured, or the depths of depravity they overcame.

Fourth, we can't overlook the benefit of being able to select books about the growth of the church over the ages, from early Christian times, middle ages, through to the present. And experiencing the lives of Christians in various cultures, in Africa, Japan, Latin America, and in various aspects of vocation from missionary life of St. Paul, monastic life of Bernard of Clairvaux, cloistered life of St. Therese and the spiritual struggles of contemporary Christians. All of this reading, over many years breathed life into the teachings of the faith. The family together were stunned, wept and laughed at the failures, victories and foibles of ordinary persons struggling to become saints.

Lastly, but I could write more, there is something to be said for allowing others to teach your children profound truths while you have the advantage of listening in. So much of our modern culture excludes the parent: phones with earbuds, social media correspondence, internet videos...these are all unchecked floodgates of ideas into your children's minds. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree, and many parents passively allow their children to be mauled by ideas that sow seeds of disaster. Why?... when parents are charged by creation to be their children's primary instructors? But in our spiritual reading these systemic weaknesses are avoided. We not only can pick the material to be read but we can hear the words spoken to our children and quietly absorb their reaction...are they struggling with a concept, a principle, or do they understand it? Are they attentive or bored? Ah, to have an hour weekly to sit with your children and consider and observe their state of maturation...That is a gift.

Tips and techniques:

First, start simply, read for a shorter period at first, perhaps just one-half hour, but as the children mature move this to longer, we found 50 minutes to an hour was typically the most they would want to spend, however there were times when they would push to read more when we were in a particularly interesting story. We started with short stories, but eventually moved to full length books, and teaching documents like the Catechism, but also alternated to keep it interesting.

A fixed time of day is not necessary. We had to keep it flexible to accommodate everyone's schedule. Sometimes it even meant reading in the car on the way to an event or family visit, and when on vacation.

Reading last thing in the day or after a heavy meal can be hard. Many was a time when one or more of us would begin to nod off and have to stand up, or walk while reading, to stay attentive. That is ok. The personal push to accomplish our goal builds tenacity. And the children seemed to find particular humor in watching a tired mom or dad slump away or begin to mumble when reading. To realize mom or dad are human, and to grow in compassion for them, and watch them struggle, is good too.

Here are some favorites that we have read as a family over the years:

<p>Surprised by Truth, Surprised by Truth 2, Surprised by Truth 3</p> <p>This series, three books, is fantastic for discovering what Christianity, and the Catholic faith have to offer. The three books cover the journey of 30 or so persons who made a journey from no faith or some faith, wending their way to Catholicism...what they struggled with or, didn't understand. The stories move fast and in a non-systematic way build an organic understanding of the faith.</p>	<p>Patrick Madrid</p>
<p>Mere Christianity, The Problem of Pain, The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce</p> <p>These are appropriate at high school age. Within these stories the young person explores the work of the human mind, the capacity of a person to deceive himself, the spiritual battle in everyday life. C. S. Lewis is a delightful and witty writer, with a great ability to reveal what we often overlook.</p> <p>(The children read The Chronicles of Narnia and the Perelandra series on their own)</p>	<p>C.S. Lewis</p>

<p>The Shadow of His Wings</p> <p>For middle school to adult readers. The true story of a young man preparing for priesthood in Germany at the outbreak of WWI. Goldmann's seminary class is forcibly inducted into the SS, where Goldmann is trained as a radioman and nurse but continues his seminary studies as possible. He manages to become a priest during the war and nearly dies in a prison camp in Africa. A truly amazing story of the power of intercessory prayer and the true presence of God in the Eucharist. This one had us on the edge of our seats at every page.</p>	<p>Fr. Gereon Goldmann, OFM</p>
<p>The Family That Overtook Christ</p> <p>Covering the true story of Bernard of Clairvaux, a soldier of France in medieval times, his family, his decision to leave warfare and to build a monastery, and how his family eventually joined him to dedicate their lives to Christ. Written with engaging dialogue re-living the events, this story put in our hearts a desire to become another family to 'overtake Christ'.</p>	<p>M. Raymond, OCSO</p>
<p>The Hidden Power of Kindness</p> <p>A powerful book unmasking how we miss opportunities for kindness, are often unkind while deceiving ourselves as to our motives. All of our family were awakened by this reading. We have seen in broken families a sincere reading restore family love lost. This is a classic for the ages.</p>	<p>Rev. Lawrence G. Lovasik, S.V.D</p>
<p>With God in Russia, He Leadeth Me</p> <p>Walter Joseph Cizek, S.J. was a Polish-American Jesuit priest who conducted clandestine missionary work in the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1963. Fifteen of these years were spent in confinement and hard labor in the Gulag, plus five preceding them in Moscow's infamous Lubyanka prison. He was released and returned to the United States in 1963, after which he wrote these two books and served as a spiritual director. The story is bracing. A cause has been opened for his canonization.</p>	<p>Fr. Walter J. Cizek, S.J.</p>
<p>The Book of Ruth, The Book of Tobit, The Book of Job, The Book of Wisdom, The Gospel of Matthew The Gospel of John, The Acts of the Apostles, The Letter to the Galatians</p> <p>While all the bible is edifying, these books were selected for our family reading as a group. I think the line they thought the most funny to hear was St. Paul writing "Oh stupid Galatians..."</p>	<p>The New American and Navarre Bibles</p>

<p>33 Days to Morning Glory</p> <p>(we read this in preparation for a family consecration)</p>	Fr. Michael E. Gaitley
<p>Christ is Passing By</p> <p>Very great homilies by the priest who founded Opus Dei. Reading him stimulated in our family a desire to make all aspects of our lives holy and harmonize the spiritual and secular aspects of our lives.</p>	St. Josemaria Escriva
<p>The Grunt Padre: Father Vincent Robert Capodanno Vietnam 1966-1967</p> <p>This New York city youth became a priest and eventually a Marine who served as a chaplain in Vietnam. After years of ministry on the battlefield he was killed while attending to a fallen soldier caught in a firefight. Reading his story of perseverance built up in our family a resolve to live with tenacity. A cause for his canonization has been opened, he is now known as Servant of God, Father Vincent Capodanno.</p>	Fr. Daniel L. Mode
<p>Something Other Than God</p> <p>An engaging story of a modern-day blogger and Twitter writer's journey from atheism to Catholicism.</p>	Jennifer Fulwiler
<p>A Pocket Catechism for Kids</p> <p>We love this little Catechism. It could easily be recovered and published as an abbreviated Catechism for adults, it is engaging for everyone. It is written in a question and answer format like the old Baltimore Catechism. We would read each question multiple times, asking the next person the question and them responding, then them asking the next person and that person responding, thus going around the room.. Ex: "Question 38. <i>Where do the sacraments get their power to give grace?</i>" "The power comes from Jesus' own life, especially His suffering, death, and resurrection. God's power works through the sacraments in spite of our weakness."</p>	Fr Kris D. Stubna / Mike Acquilina
<p>The Apostolates Family Catechism</p> <p>This a more difficult read. We read this late high school and college years when college students could join.</p>	Rev. Lawrence G. Lovasik, S.V.D
<p>Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd Edition (various sections)</p>	Libreria Editrice Vaticana
<p>Encountering the Saints Series - by Pauline Books & Media</p>	Various

<p>Young Readers - The family loved these and they are short and move quickly. Some titles:</p> <p>Saint Martin de Porres – Humble Healer</p> <p>Saint Damien of Molokai – Hero of Hawaii</p> <p>Blessed Pier Georgio Frassati – Journey to the Summit</p> <p>Saint Maximillian Kolbe – Mary’s Knight</p>	
<p>Sun and Wind – The Legend of Joseph of Arimathea</p> <p>A historical fiction of the Christianization of Britain. We liked the way this story brought to life the slow unfurling of the good news that God had become man and calls all persons to eternal life. In general, we don’t often consider what life would be like in a culture which had no concept of eternal life, or of a loving Creator. This story develops a scaffolding for considering the historicity of what has been seen, touched and experienced by those before us.</p> <p>(Our children also very much enjoyed fictional history of the first Christians of Rome in <i>Junia</i> and <i>Marcus</i>, both by Michel E. Giesler)</p>	<p>William Boardman</p>

And many more..., it’s amazing what can be accomplished over time with a plan. 52 weeks, twenty years, one-thousand hours, but in drops, like water, moving a mountain. Build a strong foundation and the faith will flourish through adversity and the swirls of contemporary confusion. Good luck! Enjoy!

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