



GROWING FAITH

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THE POWER OF PRAYER

Few things are as essential to our health and well-being, yet carry as vast an assortment of experience (and therefore baggage), as prayer. Some of us were never taught how to pray. For others, what was taught wasn't meaningful, so we have placed prayers and praying in a box on a shelf in the back of the closet, to be taken out only on special occasions—at funerals, for example, or when a loved one is ill.

Many of us do use prayer more or less regularly, but we aren't sure that what we're doing is right. As one parent lamented, "I keep thinking there must be something like a 'secret handshake' that would make my prayers more effective, but I don't know what it is—or how to find out."

Whatever your experience of prayer is or has been, consider this: prayer is, at its heart, a remembering. We pray in order to remember who we are. We pray to remember God, who is both our source and the eternal essence within each of us that is whole, perfect, and unchanging.

Whether we have been praying all our lives or are just taking the first few tentative steps toward remembering who we are, let us take encouragement from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who observed, "We do not want to be beginners, but let us be convinced that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life."



PUTTING MORE PRAYER IN YOUR DAY

If prayer is not yet part of your daily life, the good news is that it's never too late to begin! Here are a few old and new ideas to try alone or with your family:

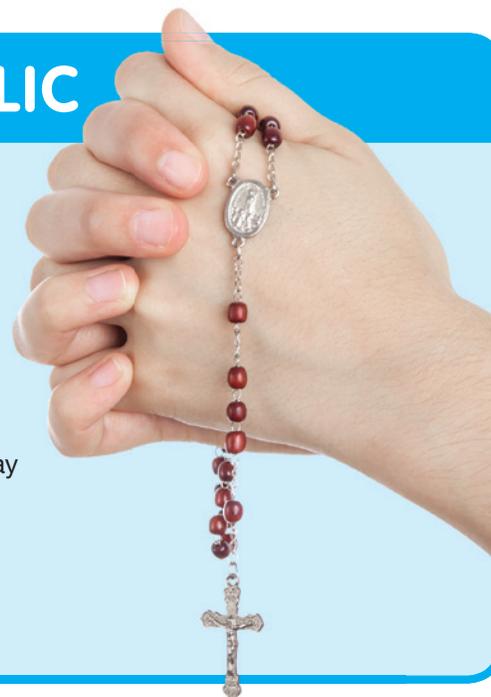
- Create a regular time and a place to pray. Plan to wake up 30 minutes earlier every morning, take 20 minutes of your lunch hour, or commit to a prayer time before you go to sleep each night. Experiment until you find the time and place that you are least likely to be interrupted.
- Find a book of prayers that you like and use it daily. There are hundreds of them on the market, or you may already have one at home.
- If you prayed as a child, revisit some of the prayers you prayed then. You have a different perspective now that you are a parent, and these prayers may resonate in ways they did not when you were younger. For example, see *The Practicing Catholic*, below. Pray these prayers with your child and tell why they mean so much to you.
- Create a simple ritual that you and your child could perform at the beginning or end of each day.
- Try reading these two lines from Psalm 118:24 each morning:
Adult: *This is the day the LORD has made . . .*
Child: *Let us rejoice in it and be glad.*
- Before you begin any prayer, ask your child if there is anyone for whom he or she would like to pray. Then be sure to add your own intention. This simple exercise teaches children to think of others and reminds them that prayer benefits even those who are not present.
- Check out bookstores, the Internet, or your local library for a book of mealtime prayers to use each time you and your child share a meal together.
- Take your child to Mass each week. The Mass, of course, is *the* prayer, the great remembering of who we are and who we aspire to be. If your child reacts negatively, have your response ready: "This is who we are. This is what we do."
- Try writing your prayers in the form of a letter to God. At first this might seem overwhelming, but the inspiration, peace, and comfort it provides make the exercise a joyful, life-giving habit.



THE PRACTICING CATHOLIC

During the Vietnam War, my father decided that our family would pray the Rosary together every night for three years while my brother was in the Marines. My brother came home safely, but by then I was pretty sure I never wanted to say another Rosary again! Recently though, I had the idea to time my morning stretching exercises by saying the Our Father and the Hail Mary instead of counting the seconds. After a week I realized I had an entire Rosary in my exercise routine. This simple change has transformed my experience of both prayer and exercise. It also connects me in a profound way to my father, who died over ten years ago.

—Ann Lang O'Connor, author of *The Twelve Unbreakable Principles of Parenting* (ACTA Publications)





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To Everything There Is a Season

One of the many delights of having a child in kindergarten is that classroom lessons and activities revolve around the yearly calendar. Seasons and feast days, holidays, and ordinary time make up a large part of the curriculum and, because the calendar is now a significant part of your child's life, it will become a noticeable part of yours. That is a very good thing, because living in harmony with the rhythms of the earth satisfies an ancient and universal, though often neglected, yearning: to feel part of the natural world around us.



The liturgical year of the Church mirrors and expands these natural rhythms. From the glowing candlelight on our Advent wreaths, to the ashes that mark the beginning of Lent, to the abundance of flowers at a May Crowning, our seasonal symbols and liturgies seek to make visible that which is invisible: the loving presence of God in all things.



MAKING THE MOST OF TIME

We can make the most of the time we have, or let the moments of our life pass by. Here are some ways to add depth to the days you and your family spend together.

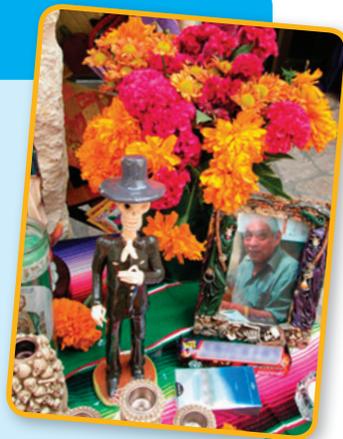
- Get each day off to a good start. Rather than getting caught up in a frantic rush, start the day together with a simple prayer, offering God the “prayers, works, joys, and sufferings” of the day to come.
- Celebrate feasts and seasons. In addition to Christmas and Easter, make a point of celebrating a saint’s day for each family member. Consider choosing the feast of the saint the person is named for or the feast of his or her favorite saint. Get a calendar listing the main feast days of the Church. Make a point of celebrating in a special way at least once a month. Involve your child in preparing the festivities.
- Make ordinary moments special. During the long stretches of “ordinary time,” plan a celebration or two, “just because.” Have a special dessert at dinner or go out for ice cream just because God made us a family.
- Create and appreciate family rituals. First, appreciate the positive rituals your family has already adopted. You might also consider picking a night of the week as family night—a time for games, watching a movie, telling or reading aloud stories, riding bikes, or doing another fun activity as a family. Make it a time everyone can count on being together.
- Savor the gift of the present moment. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:21) Realize that this present moment is the one in which we can encounter God—not some distant and theoretical time in the future, but right here and right now. Be open to and look for evidence of God’s presence in your life right now, such as in the joyful innocence of your child or in the strength you receive to rise to the challenges you face during the day.
- As a family, attend the seasonal liturgical celebrations in your parish whenever possible. They are often family-friendly, and they will help nurture in you and in your child a sense of the sacredness of each season throughout the year.
- Take regular walks with your child to look for signs of the season. Help sharpen your child’s powers of observation by asking questions, such as “What is it that you like about what you see?”



THE PRACTICING CATHOLIC

Some years ago, I attended an exhibit of artists from Mexico. Each artist had created an *ofrenda*, or offering, to commemorate the life and times of a deceased family member. Moved by what I saw, I decided to make an *ofrenda* at home in memory of my father. I gathered photographs and a few other items that he had used and treasured during his life and placed them on the mantel in my living room. As I worked, long-forgotten incidents from my childhood came flooding back. I remembered my father vividly in specific ways that I had not since he died—things like his twinkly eyes, his laugh, and especially the way his hands looked and felt. This ritual has become my treasured tradition on the Feast of All Souls, partly because of the powerful memories it evokes and partly because I can share them with my children.

—Ann Lang O’Connor, author of *The Twelve Unbreakable Principles of Parenting* (ACTA Publications)



Ofrenda for My Father,
Ripot Garcia



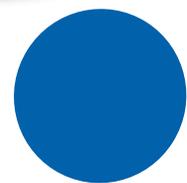
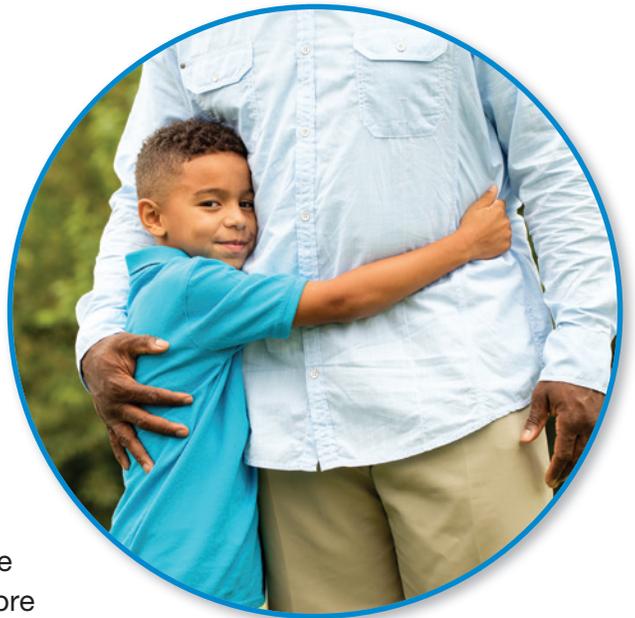
Forgiveness in the Family

Some of the very best moments in a family come when forgiveness is freely offered and received all around. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “[T]he home is the first school of Christian life. . . .” It is the place where we “learn endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, [and] generous—even repeated—forgiveness. . . .” (CCC #1657) As fallible human beings, we need to learn to forgive as well as how to ask to be forgiven. What a blessing it is to live in a home where forgiveness is generously given and received. Forgiveness is a hallmark of Christian life.

When we recite the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught us, we say, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In that short passage, Jesus described forgiveness as an essential part of Christian life. Forgiveness is like a river: its nature is to flow, and we know that it flows first and foremost from the heart of God. Because we are forgiven, we are able to forgive others.

One of the most important faith lessons you can teach your child is how to say “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.” That’s because God’s love for us comes wrapped in forgiveness. The more we can accept forgiveness and pass it on to others, the more capacity we will have to receive and give God’s love.

Children learn best from what’s modeled to them. In homes where the words “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” are heard frequently in the course of family life, children develop the confidence to expect to give and receive forgiveness and the hope that reconciliation will be the result.



Getting Started



Some lessons are best learned by practice. Here are a few suggestions on how you can make your home a school of Christian life by modeling the virtue of forgiveness.

- When your child has done something you need to correct, ask in a way that does not bring shame: “Do you understand what you did wrong?” or “Do you understand how your behavior hurt your sister?” The point is not punishment as much as it is helping your child grow in awareness.
- When correcting your child, be sure to make a distinction between the behavior and the person. For example, say, “Hitting other people is wrong because it will hurt them” instead of “You’re a bad boy for hitting Jason.” This is not to let the child “off the hook” but will help him or her, over time, build empathy and understand the consequences of his or her actions.
- When you’ve acted in a way you regret, model for your child the way to ask forgiveness:
 1. Say you are sorry.
 2. Be specific as to what you are sorry for.
 3. Make an honest promise to do better in the future. It might sound something like this: “Jennifer, I’m sorry that I yelled at you in the car. I was worried I was going to be late, and I didn’t take time to listen to your questions. I hope you’ll forgive me. I will try to leave more time between errands next time so that I’ll have time to listen to your questions.”
- Let your child see you give and receive forgiveness with other family members. Apologizing is not a sign of weakness. It is an acknowledgment that we adults can fail and that forgiveness is important to us too.
- The next time you pray the Lord’s Prayer as a family, point out to your child the phrase, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Explain that Jesus wants us to forgive one another and to ask for forgiveness when we haven’t been loving to one another. Forgiveness is a sign that God is in our home.
- Tell your child the story of the Good Shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep. (Luke 15:3–7) This is a good opportunity to let your child know that Jesus is always ready to forgive us no matter what we do. We just need to tell him we’re sorry.





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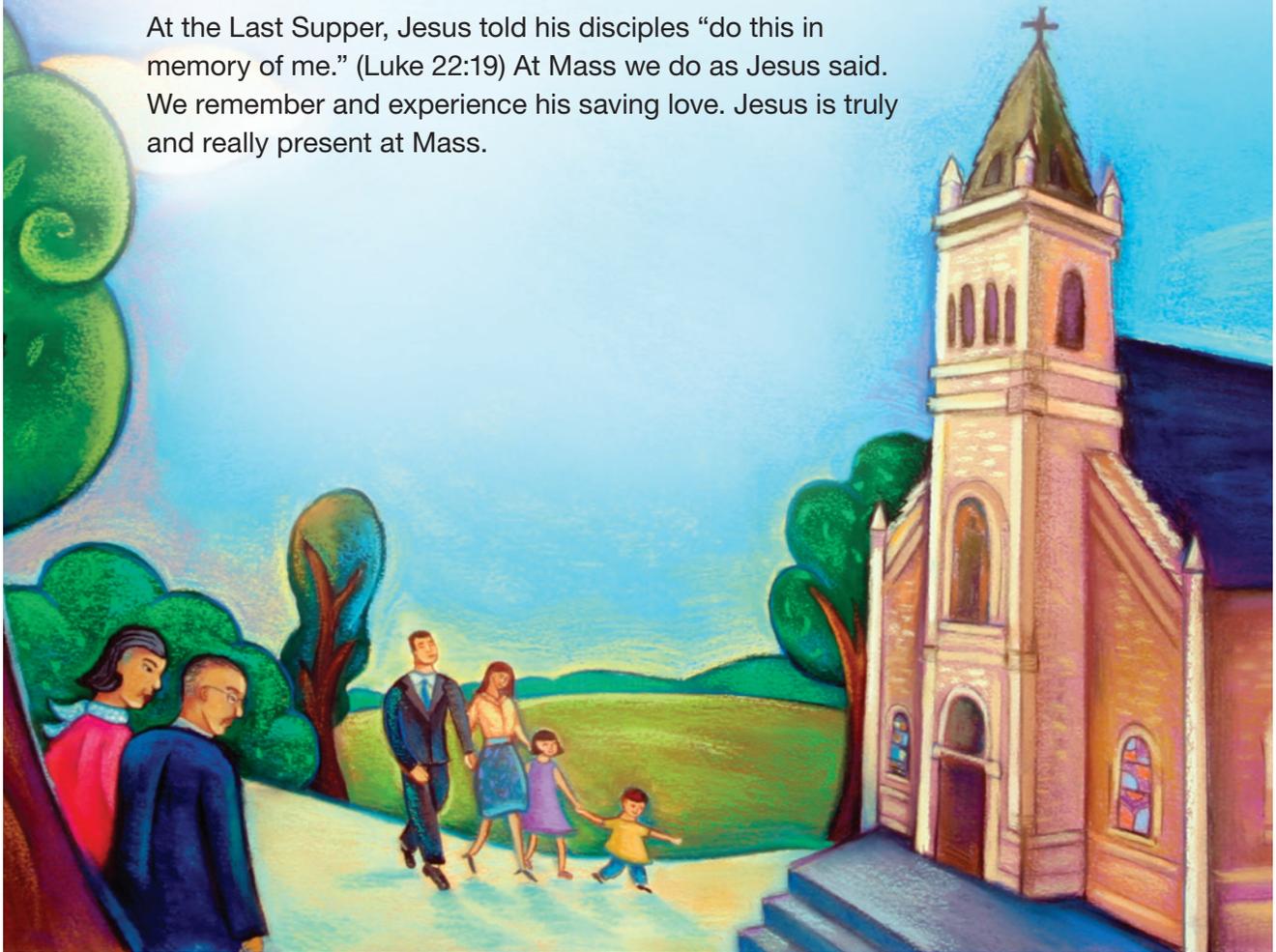
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“Do This in Memory of Me.”

Memory is a remarkable human trait. In basic biology we learned that all the cells in our bodies are continuously being replaced and that we are physically not the same person we were a few years ago. Yet somehow—amazingly—memory is passed along from one cell to another. We are able to remember who we are, what happened last year, and exactly how we like our eggs. Memory is nothing less than a divine tool, a gift from God that allows us to function on a daily basis. It is also the way we bring people and experiences from the past into the present moment.

Memory has a dual nature. It is like fire—with careful tending it can provide warmth and light, but if left unattended it will consume everything in its path. Likewise, we can use our memory to practice the art of reflection, or we can use it to avoid living in the present by wallowing in the past.

At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples “do this in memory of me.” (Luke 22:19) At Mass we do as Jesus said. We remember and experience his saving love. Jesus is truly and really present at Mass.



Make the Most of the Mass

Here are ways you and your family members can get more meaning from your experience of the Mass.

- Imagine that you are at Mass for the first time. What do you notice that you haven't before? See the beauty and the flow of the prayers and singing, the reading and reflecting, and the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ.
- Listen at each Mass for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you. Take it into your heart and reflect on it in your prayer times during the week.
- What does the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ mean to you? Ask the members of your family who are old enough to answer this question at the dinner table.
- Stop after Mass to light a vigil candle and to say a prayer for someone who has died or is ill. Ask for whom your child would like to pray.
- Recall the response for the Responsorial Psalm, a message from the Gospel, or a thought from the priest's Homily, and discuss it on the car ride home from Mass.
- Have your child invite along friends to Mass, or include members of your extended family.
- Sing a favorite hymn as your grace before meals or while riding together in the car.

Mass and Your Family

Families face a variety of hurdles on the way to Mass—a stalling, whining child, our own fatigue, or ordinary inertia. But like other obstacles we overcome to ensure our child's well-being, getting to Mass is worth the effort. Nothing is as important to our child's spiritual welfare as being part of a faith community. The rhythm it establishes for the week, the hour of (relative) quiet, and simply being in the presence of others while they sing, pray, reflect, ask forgiveness, and share the Body and Blood of Christ all have a powerful impact on a child. This is true even if it seems (and he or she claims) that your child is getting nothing out of the experience. It's just another thing your child might not appreciate until he or she is older. Keep at it. You're giving your child a gift that can last an eternity.



THE PRACTICING CATHOLIC

Like many Catholics, I stopped attending Mass when I moved out on my own. After my first child was born, I decided to try again. Sitting in church, a passage from 1 Corinthians came to mind. "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things." (13:11) It dawned on me that as an adult and a parent, the prayers and readings might touch me differently. From that point on, I focused on what was happening. One Sunday while listening to the opening prayer, I felt an overwhelming wave of emotion. It was like hearing the words for the first time and yet it was all so familiar. I started crying and couldn't stop. That was 16 years ago. I've stopped crying, but I haven't stopped coming to Mass.

—Ann Lang O'Connor, author of *The Twelve Unbreakable Principles of Parenting* (ACTA Publications)

