

HOW TO PRAY AS A FAMILY

Excerpt from Lord, Teach Us to Pray by Father Peter John Cameron, O.P.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes the importance of family prayer: “The Christian family is the first place of education in prayer. Based on the sacrament of marriage, the family is the ‘domestic church’ where God’s children learn to pray ‘as the Church’ and to persevere in prayer. For young children in particular, daily family prayer is the first witness of the Church’s living memory as awakened patiently by the Holy Spirit” (n. 2685).

In order to understand how to divide individual and family prayer within family life, we might consider three key aspects of family life: relationships, time, and change. The combination of diverse relationships within the family affects the way the members pray both individually and as a family, beginning with the relationship between parents and children. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that, in the beginning, children cannot distinguish between absolute, divine goodness and the creaturely goodness they encounter in their parents. As a result, children at first cannot differentiate between parental love and God’s love. This difference must be taught tenderly through the witness of the parents’ own humility, prayer, and dependency upon God.

For this reason, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) stresses the fundamental and irreplaceable role of the concrete, living example of parents in educating their children to pray. “Only by praying together with their children can a father and a mother (exercising their royal priesthood) penetrate the innermost depths of their children’s hearts and leave an impression that the future events in their lives will not be able to efface” (FC, 60).

Moreover, in this regard, parents “must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus. ... Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it” (CCC, n. 2232).

As a result, the excellence of a family’s prayer life very much flows from each individual member’s relationship with the Lord. For this reason, if possible, parents — and godparents — should provide their children with the religious articles that foster an intimate personal relationship with God, especially a Bible, a crucifix, a rosary, an image of the Blessed Mother, a missal, a collection of devotional prayers, etc. Every member of the family should be encouraged to make time each day to be alone with God in prayer.

At the same time, devotion to the communion of saints should be explained and cultivated, especially by introducing children to the lives of their own patrons and of

the patron saints of the entire family. Litanies and lives of the saints — read privately or as a family — further this interest.

With a missal, each member of the family might be encouraged to meditate privately on the Scripture readings for the coming Sunday, especially the Gospel. That meditation might be guided by the question: What is Jesus saying to me in these readings? After that, a certain time might be set aside each week before Sunday Mass to share these reflections together. Such discussion serves to deepen each person's appreciation of the Scripture and of the active presence of the Lord. At the same time, shared reflection of this sort draws the family more deeply together in God's love and truth, and prepares them to participate more fully in the Liturgy.

In a unique way, the rosary prayed as a family helps to define and strengthen family relationships. For in that prayer we recall the Incarnation of Jesus, particularly as his life is revealed through the mystery of the Holy Family, which the Christian family seeks to image. We meditate on the life of the Son of God by calling on the heavenly Father as well as the Mother of God. Thus, "the rosary should be considered as one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite. ... When the family gathering becomes a time of prayer the rosary is a frequent and favored manner of praying. ... Generous imitation of the Blessed Virgin's interior spiritual attitude constitutes a special instrument for nourishing loving communion in the family and for developing conjugal and family spirituality" (FC, 61).

The wonder of time also presents a golden opportunity for family prayer and spiritual growth. A simple morning prayer offered together gives each day a God-centered focus, and provides a habitual reminder to impressionable young people about the real priorities in life. In the same way, night prayers said together form a lasting attitude of hopefulness in which gratitude for the day and longing for the next morning make us mindful of eternal life, for which our earthly sojourn is a preparation. Mealtime also is a prime occasion for family prayer that reinforces the importance of unfailing thankfulness and constant, humble dependency upon the grace of God.

Liturgical time is also replete with occasions for special family prayer. The rituals and special customs attendant to Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Eastertide bless the family with a sanctified way of accounting the passing of time. A reverent commemoration of the Church's holy days, especially by praying novenas in preparation, enables children to grasp the right way to celebrate holidays.

Family life is filled with constant change that prayer should consecrate. “Joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, births and birthday celebrations, wedding anniversaries of the parents, departures, separations and homecomings, important and far-reaching decisions, the death of those who are dear, etc. — all of these mark God’s loving intervention in the family’s history. They should be seen as suitable moments for thanksgiving, for petition, for trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common Father in heaven” (FC, 59).

In a special way, family prayer should predominate as family members prepare for the sacraments — Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, First Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony and the Anointing of the Sick. The sacraments signal holy changes that sanctify, drawing all of us closer to God.

Such a program of family prayer approximates the time-tested pattern of prayer observed by many religious communities in the Church. It complements private meditation and liturgical prayer so that the Christian family can “assume and comply fully with all its responsibilities as the primary and fundamental cell of human society” (FC, 62).⁹²