

Family Rituals Celebrate Family Unity, God's Presence

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My two-year-old great nephew loves his own bed, his own blankets and his little turtle and lamb that go to bed with him each night. On his second birthday, he received some new things for his bedroom, including a new comforter and large new pillow (both from his favorite movie, *Cars*).

One evening I was taking care of him and his sister a few days after his birthday. As I put him to bed and we followed our usual ritual of thank you prayers and a blessing, he was very antsy and not connecting with me. When I finished, he proceeded to tell me – quite emphatically - he didn't want the new comforter or the pillow in his bed. I carefully removed them and made sure he was covered with his usual blankets, with his turtle and lamb close by. Then, with a big smile he said, "OK. Now do it again."

Now he was ready to pray and participate in our blessing. As I've shared this story many times with my friends, everyone's immediate reaction is: "the importance/power of ritual!"

Ritual is the stuff of our life – our everyday life, our family life, our Catholic life. It nourishes us, it grounds us, it comforts us, it teaches us. Meg Cox (*The Heart of a Family: Searching America for New Traditions that Fulfill Us*. Random House) says, "We cling to rituals as the virtual definition of our family. In fact, research has found that when people are asked to describe their family to someone else, rituals are often the

first things mentioned. They create a feeling of belonging to a family and not just living in it.”

The rituals we celebrate in family are holy in themselves, for God’s presence shouts first and foremost in the relationships of family life. At the same time, they ground us, prepare us, move us to the rituals of our Catholic family, the rituals which abound in our Catholic way of life.

What are the rituals that surround your family life? that celebrate your family? that slow down the pace of life? that celebrate the uniqueness of each and every one of you? that give thanks for the presence of God intimately, uniquely and constantly with you?

- Many families have family meetings once a month. Ask: How are we doing as a family? Does anything need to be changed? How will we do it?
- Schedule one night a week for “total family” activities and let nothing interfere. The night may be changed, but save one night to do something as a family – at home or outside the home. Let different members choose the activity.
- One of the most unique and important times of the day for rituals is bedtime. Bedtime is a crucial time and, although the busy-ness of family schedules provides a challenge, it is a time that cannot be rushed and should not be skipped. The actual look of the bedtime ritual will vary from family to family, but its peacefulness and closure to the day will bring much to everyone’s life. Years ago there was a book, *The Power of Negative Thinking* by Sidney

Simon, which told of a master teacher, Mamie Porter. At the end of the week, Mamie asked her student teachers three questions. These three questions could be adapted to night-time conversation with children which could then flow into night-time prayer. The adaptations are:

- What were you happy about today?
- If you had today to do over, is there anything you would do differently?
- Is there anything I can help with? any way I can help you with something?

These questions provide the inroads for insightful conversations between parents and children concerning what happened during their day and all the feelings evoked by the happenings and then lead to prayers of gratitude, of sorrow, of petition, recognizing God's presence in the everydayness of life.

- Family meal time is another rich, indispensable time for rituals and traditions. Research shows the multitudinous reasons/benefits for eating together. Parents might need to work at enabling good conversations at mealtime. Try some discussion starters:
 - What's the best thing that happened to you today?
 - When and why did you laugh today?
 - When did you think about God today?
 - What kind of "owies" did you get today on your body? On your heart?
 - If you could use only one word to describe your day today, what would it be and why?

- Reading and storytelling is a tradition that we can't lose. There's nothing like reading a book together; and there are wonderful ones available. Visit Dawn Publications at www.dawnpub.com for books such as *Because Brian Hugged His Mother*, *Lifetimes*, and *Wonderful Nature, Wonderful You*.
- Start a family diary. Each evening after dinner a different family member makes an entry (or together you can decide what the entry should be).
- Gather once a year to list each person's favorite things: book, song, food, prayer, Gospel story, etc. The lists are carefully preserved. Families that have done so report that college age children look forward to each year's new creation of lists and the review of lists from previous years.
- Many rituals tend to be family rituals, but often rituals have emerged between a parent and one child. A father, realizing he wasn't spending enough quality time with his children, began "Moonlight Walks," when his oldest daughter was ten. Each night after dinner they would walk around the block a couple of times and talk. Years later the children could remember in detail the important things in their lives they talked about on those walks.