

A How-to-Pray Primer for Parents and Families

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A few years ago, my six-year-old great nephew died suddenly. A few days before Tyler's death, I was taking care of him and his new-born sister. As I was feeding Abby, Tyler sat there, incessantly carrying on a delightful conversation. All of a sudden, he said, "You know, Janet, God is a part of every family." I'm not really sure what caused him to say that at that time. Whenever I recall that moment, I experience various emotions and memories.

One realization that his words shout to me is the power of prayer in the family: family prayer helps to make tangible the reality that we are never alone; that God is intimately with us, always and everywhere, and uniquely in family life. The Second Vatican Council restored the ancient belief of "domestic church," of family church (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 11). The first and foremost way most people experience God is within family relationships and the encounters of everyday life within the family. Prayer is what binds the family together: it is the power that enables the recognition of God with them always and everywhere, and the strength that upholds them as they live a faith-filled life in their 24/7 world.

The call to holiness is lived by most people within their everyday family lives. People are holy when they "wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2013). These two ways of living are intertwined; prayer, especially family prayer, leads to action. Pope Francis strongly asserted that "we must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity. . . . There is always the risk that some moments of prayer can become an excuse for not offering one's life in mission" (*Evangelli Gaudium*, no. 262). Family life and family prayer—because they are rooted in the "messiness" and the joys of real life—always connect family members with the needs of others.

Two Foundational Reminders

FIRST REMINDER

Family prayer flows from everyday life. Sometimes when we think of family prayer, we think that it takes much time, a great deal of work. We might think we have to duplicate what we do in church. Even though families may use the prayers of the church (Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina*, the rosary, etc.), family prayer flows from what is happening in all daily moments. Some ideas to weave prayer into your daily family life include: When something good happens, stop and pray a one-sentence prayer of thanksgiving. When something is worrying someone in the family, pause and pray for God's strength. When you hear of someone—or some part of our world—that is experiencing a difficult time, stop for prayer, asking God's care for the people involved, and that you will have the time and sensitivity to help.

Plan a time every day. Even though prayer can (and should) happen throughout the ordinary day, that which is important to us needs designated time. There's only one best time: the best time for your family. For many families, it might be mealtime and/or bedtime, but each family needs to find the best time and reserve that time as much as possible for prayer.

Pray with Scripture. Invite each family member to identify with one of the people in the Scripture passage and/or to place him or herself into the scene (e.g. one of the children who approached Jesus). Share reflections on what they think God wanted them to hear today. Use the format of *lectio divina* to listen, reflect, and decide how to live this message of God's Word in the world.

Pay attention to the Psalms. Do we pay as much attention to the Responsorial Psalm as to the other three readings at weekend liturgy? They are powerful prayers of thanks, adoration, intercession, and petition. Each day, pray (or sing) the one-line response from the weekend's psalm. Families might also decide to stop once a day, at a given time, to pray the one line that they have chosen. Whether at work, at school, or at home—scattered throughout their daily activities—all family members are united in prayer at the same time.

Mealtimes. Often, families pray our traditional blessing prayer; at times, too, other blessings or intercessory prayers might be used. Pass around a photo of a relative or friend who is sick, each person praying for him or her. Sing a song from Sunday's liturgy. Share the Sign of Peace. Pray Psalms of praise and thanksgiving, such as Ps 63:2-9; 104:13-15; 111; 146:1-2, 5-10; 107:8-9; or Mary's *Magnificat*, Lk 1:46-55.

Bedtime. What greater way to end the day than in family prayer! There are countless ways to pray as the day ends. For many people, especially for children, having a set ritual and innately knowing the process brings comfort and security. Many families end the day in a prayer of thanks, which can take many forms, such as naming the people and events in a litany form, or keeping a family gratitude journal of gratitude prayers to God. Some families use an adaptation of the prayer form from the Jesuit tradition, the *Examen of Consciousness*. The *Examen* can heighten awareness of what is going on in our daily lives, providing time for everyone to give God thanks for the gifts, as well as to bring to God the struggles we encounter. One way to adapt it for family use is to invite each person to share their thoughts on these questions. Today, what was a high point/low point? When today did you love? When did you fail to love? For what event/time today are you most grateful? For which moment are you least grateful? When did you share today? What could you have shared and chose not to? After each person has named their times, another person in the family can pray for that person, thanking God for the highs/the moments of love, and asking God to help that person with the lows/the times that could have been better.

Blessings. Family blessings have a rich history reaching back to the Old Testament, in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all blessed their children. In the New Testament, Jesus blessed the children. St. Ambrose, early in church history (338-397), said, "You may not be rich, you may be unable to bequeath great possessions to your children; but there is one thing you can give them—the heritage of your blessing. And it is better to be blessed than to be rich."

The United States bishops remind us that there are blessings such as "the ones contained in *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, that can be prayed by anyone who has been baptized, 'in virtue of the universal priesthood, a dignity they possess because of their baptism and confirmation' (*Book of Blessings*, no. 18). The blessings given by laypersons are exercised because of their special office, such as parents on behalf of their children," ([Sacramentals \(Blessings\)](#), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website).

Family blessings can be a part of daily life (when leaving for school or work, at the end of the day, at mealtimes, etc.), or they can take place during more situational events (anniversaries of Baptism and First Eucharist, first jobs, illness, graduations, etc.).

Pray life's passages. Birthdays and anniversaries are naturals, but what about also paying attention to and praying through the first driver's license, new home, beginning of the school year, etc?

SECOND REMINDER

Connect with the happenings in your world, the world, and our faith life. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Earth Day, the International Day of Peace (September 21st)—to name a few—are rich opportunities to connect faith and everyday life. Celebrate the day with prayer, ritual, and reflection.

Have your family prayer touch your public prayer (our Sunday liturgy). Prior to the Sunday celebration, read the Scripture readings together and talk about those people and situations you want to pray for during the General Intercessions. After liturgy, discuss the readings and homily, and talk about how each family member experienced God's love during the liturgy.

Pray the liturgical year. In our parishes, we pray the liturgical year well; our homes can do the same. Praying within the liturgical year demonstrates not only the family's bond to each other, but also their intimate connection to the parish and the universal church. There is a rich treasury of prayers and rituals for Advent, Christmas (the twelve days), Lent, Easter-Pentecost (the fifty days), and ordinary time, which can mark our days within the family. Feast days can be celebrated: each person's name day, as well as a saint chosen "by the family, for the family" as a witness to a value important to the family. Baptism dates, birthdays, and anniversaries are all occasions where prayer can be interwoven into the celebration.

Family prayer unites us to God and each other. Family prayer forms us for our daily lives: for our lives of discipleship. The various forms of prayer learned at home "are not luxuries, pieties for the few, but are the fibers that bind a baptized person to Christ, to the church and to each other. Without them we drift." (*Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers*, 7-8)