

adjustable Christmas tree stand, things are much better now.)

Giving an effective witness to married love also means making time for each other — which, as my children have gotten older, has become a bit easier (now when we say we are going out to dinner, they rush to hand us our coats). It also means treating one another with respect and affection in the daily interactions within our home. For those called by God to the vocation of marriage, the most faithful response to that call is to love our spouses unconditionally and to accept that same unconditional love from them (speaking of a work in progress!).

How well are we doing in keeping our kids Catholic? I wish I knew for sure. My wife and I go to bed every night, however, knowing that we've loved our children the very best our brokenness will allow — even more, sometimes, by God's grace. Perhaps it's not as much about "keeping kids Catholic" as it is about cooperating with the Spirit

to help them see how beloved of God they are.

About two years ago, my son left his hamster in the care of a friend when we went on our annual summer vacation. When we returned at the end of the week we found that the hamster had developed a case of "wet tail" — a condition that is almost always fatal for hamsters. The animal died that night. When we visited the family again a few weeks later, my son's friend made a beeline to us as we entered. "I'm sorry about your hamster," the boy said, in a voice that carried as much regret and sorrow as an 8-year-old can muster. "It's OK, Johnny. It wasn't your fault," my son replied, with a sincerity and spontaneity that took my breath away. For at least a little while that day, I couldn't help but feel my wife and I must be doing something right. **GD**

Jim Philipps has been teaching Catholic theology both in the classroom and in print for over 25 years. He has just published his fifth book, *Make Room for Scripture* (Twenty-Third Publications, 23rdpublications.com, 800-321-0411).

WHAT A SURPRISE!

Father's Day always worries me. I'm afraid I'll get a gift I can't afford.

8 keys TO KEEPING KIDS CATHOLIC

BY CAROL CIMINO, SSJ, ED.D.



A teacher and catechist shares her hard-earned wisdom

"I can't understand it!" she wailed. "I sent her to Catholic school for 12 years and she doesn't even go to church!"
If I had a nickel for every time a parent said those words (substitute "religious education" for "Catholic school") I would

be gainfully unemployed. While some parents couldn't care less or, worse, don't even notice, most parents and even grandparents are appalled that their children, especially their 16- to 22-year-olds, seem to have forsaken their

these moments to urge our kids to pay attention to true awesomeness, to go deeper, to find a sense of the sacred in everyday life, whether it's the seasons, a perfect forward pass, technology, a new baby brother, or whatever strikes

QUESTIONING PREVIOUSLY HELD BELIEFS IS PART OF GROWING UP.

heritage, their Catholic faith.

While I have over 40 years of experience as a teacher and catechist, it's what I have learned from young people that fortifies me to hand out some advice to teachers, catechists, and, yes, parents and grandparents. While nothing will guarantee that our kids will stay close to their Catholic faith, there are some great ways to cultivate their faith — and some important truths to keep in mind:

1 Remember that questioning is normal. It's time that we adults try to understand (and remember, perhaps), that questioning previously held beliefs is part of growing up.

2 We all learn by experience. Kids label many experiences "awesome." As parents and grandparents, we can build on some of

them. Catholic spirituality thrives on awe and wonder, and everyday awe and wonder lead us almost naturally into Catholic sacramentality.

3 Recognize that wariness of the Church is partially a response to how often our young people have been exposed to betrayal by their heroes. Given the frequent betrayals of people of seemingly good character they hear about in the media, it's understandable that our children may not automatically trust in and respect the heroes — the saints and holy people — we place before them. The recent scandals in the Church have also made young people — and adults — look askance at clergy and others who work in Church ministries. No wonder they are suspicious when we tell them,

"Just trust me; this is true." We need to avoid saying, "Because the Church says so," or "Because I say so," and instead help our children understand why we believe what we do, and why we love our Church despite its imperfections.

4 Recognize that parents are the most influential adults in a child's life. The example that parents set is the most potent tool we have to help keep God and religion in our children's lives. I believe that discussions on matters of faith, the place of church, of worship and prayer, the place of God in the questions of morality, ethics, and relationships ought to be in the context of the family experience. I always

felt closest to my own students when we shared our faith stories, those times when the only solace was knowing that God loves us, or that we are always given the gift of peace and hope by a God who desires only the best for us. No parent should want to give that experience up to a teacher; it is the privilege of parenthood. Parents can feel free to tell their own stories because they indicate for the child the importance of having a personal relationship with God. During hard times, a mother's or father's spoken trust in the providence of God goes a long way toward comforting the child and helping the child understand that to be an adult means keeping God visible and reachable.

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

Here's my answer Young people have asked me, "If I lead a good life, respect other people, and pray in private, why do I have to go to church?" My answer: "All of that is just fine, but the idea is to do all that with all the other people who do all that." One of the purposes of going to church is to see that you are not the only one who does good works, loves your neighbor (even when she is unlovable), and struggles daily with doing what is expected of a Catholic. Finally, going to Mass and receiving the Eucharist should provide us with the sustenance and strength we need to go out there and do it all over the coming week.

5 Don't be afraid to ask catechists and teachers for tools to answer religious and spiritual questions. The relationship between parents and the parish religious education program or the Catholic school should be a part-

grandparents to be involved.

Grandparents have the gift of perspective when it comes to faith. The older person can contribute stories and experiences that they now see as builders of the wisdom of senior citizen-hood. While par-

GRANDPARENTS HAVE THE GIFT OF PERSPECTIVE WHEN IT COMES TO FAITH.

nership. Parents should feel free to tap into this resource when those "teachable moments" come along. Teachers are trained in the stages of religious development of children, and ought to help parents anticipate questions, concerns, and issues even before they are evident.

6 Encourage grandparents' role in the life of a young person. There is magic in the skipping of a generation, I am convinced. Grandparents have the perspective of having raised the parent of a teen and of knowing the angst that that parent both caused and experienced. For many youngsters, these are the people who may be more available and have more time to listen to the young person's anxieties about God and life. Let's encourage

ents are often stressed by work and home obligations, grandparents have been there, done that.

7 Nurture the understanding of what it means to belong to the Catholic Church among our young people, especially our teens. The National Study of Youth and Religion noted that religion and God are indeed important in the lives of youngsters, but that the central problem is "whateverism" when religion and the Church leave them cold.

I can remember Easter Sunday in Rome about 20 years ago. I had a group of teens with me and we were attending Easter Mass in St. Peter's Square. From behind me, I heard one of the teens whisper: "Sister, Sister!" This was repeated as Stephen made his way through the

crowd to stand next to me. "What?" I asked. "The Mass," he said. "It's the same!" He had made the connection that, even here, on another continent, the Mass was the Mass, and the Church was the Church.

I've had the experience of attending LifeTeen Masses in Arizona, where the teens were all in T-shirts with "Catholic and Proud of It" on the front. I wasn't all that thrilled with this seeming xenophobia, but I had to admit that this was preferable to gang colors by a long shot. It brought home to me that there is this eternal quest of the adolescent for relationship, belonging.

8 Don't panic if your teen seems uninterested in religion. We all need to get down to the work of animating and marinating young people, of showing them, by example, that

the Church is a home where they are always welcome, where they can work out their doubts and fears, where the message is always the message of Jesus, and where they may, one day, bring their own children. Even if they never reconnect with the Church of their childhood, we never know how they may be close to God in their own hearts. We can only keep the door open, keep praying, and put our children in God's hands. **GD**

Sister Carol Cimino is a Sister of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York. She has been a teacher and an administrator on all levels of Catholic education and currently co-directs the Catholic School Leadership Institute at Manhattan College. She is the author of *Come Gather 'Round: Time-Tested Lessons From a Lifelong Catechist* (Twenty-Third Publications, 23rdpublications.com, 800-321-0411).

MOM'S CELL PHONE ADVENTURE

Vicky was away at a conference in another city. During a short break, she decided to call home but discovered that her cell phone didn't get reception around the skyscraper. She noticed a pay phone on the street and decided to call collect. Her 6-year-old son picked up the phone and heard a stranger's voice say, "We have Vicky on the line. Will you accept the charges?" Frantic, the 6-year-old dropped the receiver and charged toward his father.

"Dad!" he yelled. "They have Mom! And they want money!"