



KEEPING MY KIDS CATHOLIC

My children's faith journey is likely to be a long and winding one. Still, there's encouraging evidence that my wife and I are doing something right...

BY JAMES PHILIPPS

For a moment, I was in heaven.

"Dad," my daughter said as we were getting into the car after Mass one Sunday, "I know why God wants us to go to Church."

"Tell me why," I said, smiling to myself as I prepared to reap the reward of all the hard work my wife and I had done to instill the core values of our Catholic faith.

"You know how you tell us all the time how much God loves us?" she

continued.

"Yes," I said, my anticipation growing.

"Well," she continued, with just the tiniest glimmer in her eye, "God wants us to go to Mass so we will get bored to death and come back home to Him sooner!"

Even as my balloon was deflating, I had to admit this was pretty clever coming from a fifth-grader.

It was in this moment I realized that, despite my training as a theologian and a career dedicated to the catechesis of teenagers, my children's journey from "Catholicism by culture" (something into which they had been born) to "Catholicism by conviction"

(something they each could call their own) would be just like mine: long and winding, filled with desert wanderings, and always a work in progress.

We know, in light of Vatican II, that this is not a cause for despair. One of the wonderful fruits of that council is our recognition that simply teaching children to memorize prayers and doctrines does little in the way of truly incorporating them into the Catholic faith. It is like trying to teach the fundamentals of good horsemanship without ever letting the student mount a horse. Until one has met the risen Christ and heard Him speak to the heart through the

Holy Spirit, he or she can't possibly appreciate the point of all things Catholic.

My wife and I do try our best to cover the basics. They start with a recognition of how important the "domestic church" is in helping our children appreciate the wider Church community. We do all we can to communicate to our son and daughter that the family of God on any level is one in which all members feel loved, forgiven, and welcome. There are material things we don't have that the neighbors do because my wife and I will not work the

hours the neighbors work. In an age when some surveys report that the average American family spends about four to eight minutes a day together, we stubbornly buck the trend by upholding the sacredness of the dinner hour — or, at least, the dinner half-hour. It's hard to put into words how good I feel when I overhear my son or daughter tell their friends not to call during dinner because "you know how crazy Mom and Dad get."

There's no more powerful way to communicate to our children how cherished and sacred they are than to be present to them. And not just in the more formal situations of athletic events and recitals.

TIPS FOR KEEPING KIDS CATHOLIC

1 Remember that Jesus loves them even more than you do. Raising children is a little like waking up one day and realizing one of your vital organs has developed free will. We love them so much that if we think they have wandered off the right path — or at least what the "right path" was for us — we feel we are abandoning them if we can't bring them back. These feelings are magnified when it comes to our attempts to pass on the Catholic faith. Yet in the faith journey, as in all

things, our children will sometimes go places where we can't follow. Remember in those moments that they are never alone. The promise the risen Christ made to his first disciples still holds true — "I am with you always."

2 Show them how to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." We must set the example for how we want our children to treat others — especially the poor and the oppressed, who are God's

special-interest group. Yet we must not neglect the other side of this holy balancing act either.

God delights in each and every one of us. Every moment is an opportunity to celebrate the presence of God in our lives and in our world. Show your children the importance of making time for yourself and for the things that help you experience the beauty and sacredness of your life. Help them to discover these things for themselves. How can you "love your neighbor as yourself" if you

don't love yourself?

3 Help them to stand on their own two "spiritual" feet. All Catholic spirituality rests on the two "feet" of the Eucharist and the Scriptures. Help them to appreciate the profound encounter with the risen Christ that awaits them in both. Do all that you can to make the Eucharist and time for Scripture reading and reflection a regular part of your own life and your family life.

Long after my son has grown up, I'll have a warm feeling for those stairs leading into the living room where we would sit on Saturday mornings and talk about the day ahead — just two guys in their pajamas.

This domestic church, of course, has threads that bind us to our extended family. We are blessed to have all four of our parents living, and we value as they do the time they spend with our children. There's a pureness in the love of that interaction. Not only for our children, either; those tensions which sometimes arise between our parents and ourselves never seem so bad when compared to that bond of love we share for these two precious gifts of God.

As for connecting with the wider Church community, Mass attendance on Sunday is not a sub-

ject open to discussion. (Each Sunday I can almost see my children checking one more day off in their heads toward their emancipation from this tyranny.) Beyond this requirement, my wife and I try and practice “stealth Catholicism” — the attempt to introduce and reinforce essential Catholic beliefs and practices in ways that are more subtle and implicit. I'll always treasure the nights my daughter and I read *The Chronicles of Narnia* together while cuddling under a blanket before bedtime. As we reveled in the adventures of Prince Caspian and shared in the triumphs of Lucy and Susan and Peter and Edward with the help of the brave and wise Aslan, we learned much about sin and redemption and grace along the way. Now that my daughter is a teenager, my wife invites her to play games with some of the children she sees in

her occupational therapy practice as a way of reinforcing skills she is working on with the children — and as a way of showing our daughter the importance of helping others. From its earliest days, the Church in its wisdom has

fectly through Jesus Christ and his Church. How well we love one another will go a long way in determining whether our children view more formal practices of the Catholic faith as an integral part of a fully human life or as cynical

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recognized that Christ is present not only in the celebration of the sacraments but in all of creation, which came to be through Him.

Of course, whenever an opportunity presents itself that suggests that Catholicism can actually be fun — vacation Bible school, young adult retreats, or receptions after family Masses that provide food, entertainment, and fellowship, for example — we grab it.

The most effective witness my wife and I can give is the way in which we treat one another. We two who have vowed to love, honor, and cherish each other until death are the most visible examples of that covenant of love for all people God expresses so per-

gestures of hypocrisy. Why should they listen to the wonderful sounding words about Christian love at Mass if we don't seem to be practicing what they hear preached?

Alas, this was a lesson driven home to us one Christmas when my daughter was about 3 or 4. Despite our efforts to bring into our home the best of the religious and the secular celebration of Christmas, the question she had foremost in her mind that year did not concern Santa or the baby Jesus. “Are you and Daddy going to fight again when we put up the Christmas tree?” she asked my wife one day. Ouch! (Thanks to the intervention of a burly angel — my wife's cousin who delivered our tree that year — and an

WHERE TO GET MORE ADVICE

■ **Partnership with Parents** — books and resources for parents, from the Pastoral Center at Twenty-Third Publications: pastoralplanning.com/Partnership-Parents.html

■ **Growing Up Catholic** — for sacrament prep: GrowingUpCatholic.com

■ **Growing Faith** — a summary of the *Catechism* in English or Spanish, from the Pastoral Center at Twenty-Third Publications: pastoralplanning.com/GrowingFaith/GFhome.html

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. **CD**

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