

[Readings: Isaiah 50:5-9; Ps. 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35]

“We did all the right things,” said a mom of four grown children who have stopped practicing the Catholic faith. “We went to Mass as a family. We sacrificed to send them to Catholic school. They went to youth group. We did everything we thought we were supposed to do. What happened?” It’s one of the most common questions I get in every parish I serve. And it never gets any less heartbreaking. The Catholic Church is facing a spiritual epidemic. A recent study found that only 15% of children raised in Catholic homes will grow up to be practicing, faithful Catholic adults.

To find out why, and how to keep your kids Catholic, two major professional survey groups collected and reviewed data from 2,600 Americans, who successfully raised faithful adult kids. More importantly, they identified Catholic families that successfully raised all of their children to a faithful adulthood, and they interviewed both parents and faithful adult children from those families.

They found that, while things like regular Mass attendance, Catholic education, youth ministry and parish involvement were important, these families saw them as secondary and supportive of the way they lived their faith AT HOME. What happens at HOME makes all the difference.

When people hear us talk about the importance of living their faith at home, they imagine that these families are always on their knees in prayer, and somehow immune from the pressures of the real world. That is not true.

While families who successfully raised all of their children to a faithful adulthood did have regular family prayer times (usually some kind of morning, mealtime, and/or bedtime prayers), that does not appear to be the main factor responsible for their success.

What mattered most was a family dynamic in which the family (especially the children) experience their faith as the source of the warmth in their homes.

Children raised in these households experience their family’s faith as

something that draws them together in good times and bad. Your children are STARVING FOR FAITH!!! Your children are starving for the TRUTH!!!

What matters the most in homes and families are: healthy relationships with God and family members, family rituals, and a Faith that reaches out in service. Of course, these families faced the same stressors and conflicts that all families encounter. Still, they felt their family prayed about these problems in a way that led to better conversations and stronger relationships.

The Good News is that ANY family can learn these things. It's never too late. The more a family struggles to be happy, healthy and holy, the more they can benefit by cultivating the habits these families practice, which fall into three categories: **Relationships, Rituals and Reaching out.**

**Relationships.** Families are intentional about scheduling regular family time together and not letting extracurricular activities squeeze out time for things like family meals, a family day or other important family rituals throughout the week. These families allow their children to participate in activities in ways that support their family life rather than compete with it.

Families are generously affectionate. They often use the word "huggy" to describe their family dynamic. I often give "bear hugs" to those in need! With their permission, of course! These families practice gentle approaches when it comes to discipline. They create structures to encourage good behavior, and they do not shame their children for failures or use heavy-handed punishments. Instead, they treat misbehavior as an opportunity to teach better approaches to handling emotions or situations.

And when parents don't immediately know how to respond to their kids' questions or struggles, they work through things together. The kids feel "Listened to. Not "lectured to." One adult child said, "I was seen by my parents. I wasn't invisible to them. These practices help them share God's love with each other.

**Rituals.** Families have strong family rituals. They regularly work, play, talk and pray together. They assign individual chores, but they also have times when they work together as a family, washing dishes, cleaning up the house,

doing yard work or special projects together. They also have fun together regularly.

They use cell phone screens less often than they see other families doing. Instead, they play games and do activities together. I have been in a few homes where, when it is time to eat, everyone puts their phones in a small wicker basket and that's where they stay until after dessert!

This gives them the chance to talk about meaningful things like how God shows up for them or how they could take better care of each other. They schedule regular mealtimes, family meetings, parent-child dates and other times to make space for real conversation.

I was deprived of a parent-child date, one on one with either Mom or Dad. All of us kids were. I do remember, though, that when the four of us were still little kids, every night, Mom would come into our bedrooms, kiss each of us on the forehead and say, "You know, YOU are my favorite!"

Finally, **REACHING OUT**. The family prays together at home regularly. Many families in the study report some kind of brief morning time, mealtime and bedtime prayers. Perhaps pray the Rosary or a part of the Rosary. Families find little ways to make Christ a part of their family. Each member of the family asks Him for help throughout the day, thanking Him for blessings and trying to discern God's will for their family in big and small decisions.

Then, these families discuss ways they could be a blessing to others. They encourage good manners at home and with strangers. Friends, parents, kids, this is what you can do at home. All of this is what we call, "building up the Domestic Church."

Today is Catechetical Sunday, with this theme: "Lord, when did we see YOU hungry? We are hungry for God. The hunger is all around us.

In her bulletin article, Sandy reminds us that the word "catechesis" means, "to echo." Literally, we are to echo the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. This is not a suggestion; it is a command of our Lord. Parents are to be "the First and Best Teachers of the Faith," as I have outlined earlier.

In my pre-baptism classes, I remind the parents that they are “the meat” of faith and that we catechists are “the gravy.” That the parents are “the cake” and we catechists are just “the icing.” You cannot have gravy without the meat, and you cannot have icing without the cake!

To be a catechist is a privileged calling, and today we celebrate and thank them. All of us are called to echo and to share the Gospel message. We are the most important catechists to our children, our spouses, in the lives of our coworkers, our relatives, and our friends. Catechesis really begins in the heart. Yours and mine. It’s all about knowing and loving Jesus!

So, come and be fed! Bring your spiritual hunger to the table of plenty! And don’t forget when you leave here today, to bring Jesus HOME with you! Let Jesus make your relationships healthy, your family rituals holy, and your outreach to others fruitful! AMEN!