As families, we celebrate occasions that are important to us. Many have been passed from generation to generation. Over time, they have become family traditions. These traditions have been ritualised, and have become the foundation for the unity and identity of our family unit.

Family celebrations include the special events within family life that deserve celebration. They include; birthdays, welcoming a new baby into the home, first day at school, and graduation.

They may also include the celebrations within the life of the church, such as Christmas, Easter, Baptism, First Reconciliation, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation.

Family celebrations may also embrace special holidays that are important to our culture, such as ANZAC Day and Australia Day.

This issue of Living Loving Learning aims to address three questions commonly asked by parents about rituals. These questions are:
1. What are family rituals?
2. What are family religious rituals?
3. How can we create family religious rituals?
This paper will also include some practical examples of how religious rituals can be incorporated within the daily situations of family life.

**What are Family Rituals?**

"Family rituals are repeated and coordinated activities that have been imbued with meaning by the family. To be a ritual, the activity has to have meaning or significance, otherwise it is a routine" (Gobiel-Dwyer 1999 p.32). Rituals express and pass on values which are important to the life of the family and the community. They use stories, symbols, gestures and objects to express beliefs and values and give meaning to life. Within family life, rituals are usually centred on milestones in a person’s life.

One of the functions of rituals is to help us remember important events in our lives. If we remember back to our childhood, we will find that there were many rituals within our family life. As each passes we keep adding to these memories.

Apart from the celebration we remember also the meaning and value the ritual evoked. For example, the ritual of reading to our children helps us not only to recall the stories read to us in our childhood, but also stirs within us the memory of being loved and cared for.

Some rituals, which were meaningful to us as children, we may have continued in our own family. On the other hand, we may have added new ones that have new meanings relevant to our family today.

For example, as a child we may have celebrated our birthdays with the extended family. Aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents came together to celebrate the occasion. In today’s society, where many family members work long hours or work away from home, it may be more relevant to celebrate with the immediate family. It can be a time of celebration and sharing that unites the immediate family.

Children have a deep need for roots. They especially, live by rituals. "To a child, once done is a tradition" (Curran 1997, p.34). Rituals give children a sense of stability and structure. They give them a sense that they are loved, and that they belong to a community of people who care about them.

**What are Family Religious Rituals?**

For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.  
(Matthew 18:20)

Religious rituals are celebrations that open our hearts to the sacred. They enable us to express elements of faith, which are often difficult to express in words. Religious rituals help us reflect on and bring together both the sacred and secular experiences of everyday life.

There are many rituals within family life that are religious in nature. For example, each time we gather to share a meal, and we ask God’s blessing on our food, we acknowledge the goodness of God. Each morning when we wake up and welcome God into our day we acknowledge God’s presence in our daily lives. We do the same and again at night when we thank God for our day, and ask for forgiveness.

Such rituals help us to establish our identity as a Christian family and enable us to communicate and
pass on the values we treasure as Christians. They express the cultural and Christian identity of the family and, at the same time, teach our children about God’s revelation.

Religious rituals add to our celebration of the special moments within family life. They help us celebrate such occasions as birthdays, engagements, wedding anniversaries, first day of school, graduations, celebration of a driver’s license, new home, a first job, leaving home.

They help us to acknowledge and ritualise moments in family life where we experience disappointment, sadness or loss of a loved one.

Religious rituals help us celebrate significant moments of our faith story. “They highlight the passages of time and mark transitions” (Bowen 1997, p.35). For example, when a baby is born, we welcome it into the church community through the sacrament of Baptism. When two people make a lifelong commitment to each other, the Church blesses the union through the sacrament of marriage. When a family member dies, the Church ritualises this event in a funeral celebration.

Rituals mark the passage of time in the Liturgical year. For example, during the season of Lent we fast as a family to renew and prepare ourselves for the celebration of Easter. During Advent, we take time as a family to prepare ourselves spiritually for the celebration of Jesus’ birth at Christmas.

Religious rituals give us an opportunity to become aware of the presence of God. They give us the opportunity also to draw on the strength and peace God freely gives us. They give us the time and space from the ordinary business of life to reflect on the things from God that we value and treasure in each other.

Rituals, the Lived Experience

A mother had introduced a ritual of blessing her children every night by signing their forehead with a cross. One day there was an accident on the farm. The family dog had bitten the mother between the eyes and she needed medical treatment. The eldest daughter, who was ten, was trying to organise a pick up point for the ambulance. She had to drive her mother to the service road where the ambulance would pick up the mother to take her to the nearest hospital.

As the children helped the mother into the truck, her little boy took his thumb and made a sign of the cross on the mother’s forehead saying, “It’s okay mum, Jesus is with you.”

There are numerous ways in which families celebrate and ritualise such moments within family life. We create many rituals that help us celebrate these moments according to our faith, customs and traditions. The following are examples of how to make your celebrations religious rituals.

"This is our faith" (from the Rite of Baptism)

One of the first religious rituals we experience is the sacrament of Baptism through which we are welcomed into the community of the people of God. During the ceremony a candle is lit and given to the parents on the child’s behalf. The candle symbolising the light of Christ.

As a family we can celebrate this special event by acknowledging the anniversary of each member’s Baptism. Mark the occasion as you would a birthday. Invite the Godparents and other people who are significant to the person’s life.

Develop a ritual with the candle used at baptism. For example; invite the Godparents to light the Baptismal candle and repeat the words of the rite "This is the light of Christ" as they pass the candle to
their Godchild. Invite all present to pray for the person thanking God for the gift of faith. End the ritual with a cake and share stories of the day. Take out the photos of the day or watch the video taken at the Baptism.

"In peace let us take them to their place of rest"
(from the order of Christian Funeral)
The death of a loved one is a time of sadness. There are many ways in which families ritualise their loss.

Develop a ritual that helps heal the pain of our loss. Gather members of the family close around you for comfort and support. Light a candle as a reminder of the person and invite each family member to thank God for the gifts which this person brought to our lives. During a meal those present could share aspects of the persons life which have made an impact on their lives.

Mummy, Daddy Why?

For children, the death of a pet may be their first experience of death and thus can be a time of confusion and great sadness. Ritualise this moment of sadness by creating a ritual that includes prayers of thanksgiving for the opportunity of having this pet as part of the family. Invite each member to thank God for such things as the joy and happiness the pet brought into the home. Share stories of the fun times spent with the pet and for the happy memories that we will treasure as a family.

The gift that you are

Each family has their particular way of celebrating a birthday. Birthday celebrations allow families to focus on one member at a time. Develop a blessing prayer to be prayed for each person’s birthday in the household.

Decide when the blessing will be given. It could be the morning greeting, or before blowing out the candle on the cake or even at bedtime. Adding a blessing to the celebration helps to highlight the wonderful gift God has given the family in this person.

As our children get older, there are many "firsts" in their lives. Celebrate and ritualise them.

A new adventure

The first day of school at any age marks a new beginning. It can be a time of great excitement, and the same time a stress filled occasion. Rituals, such as a simple blessing prayer for the child, made as you hand them their lunch box is a gentle reminder
that God is with them for the day.

**Blessing our home**

Sometimes leaving the old home may be a time of sadness as it may be filled with many treasured memories. Create a ritual that captures the excitement of the new home and the hope that it will become a place of treasured memories.

Invite the members of the family to stand at the front door, then move from room to room blessing each. Invite each member to pray a short prayer in each. For example; in each bedroom pray for the person who will sleep in it, asking God to keep them safe from harm. In the kitchen, ask God to bless the cook or cooks of the home as they supply the daily food.

**Keep them safe from harm**

A teenager getting a driver’s license is for many the first step toward the adult world. It gives them a sense of new freedom and responsibility. At the same time, it gives parents a new set of worries. Celebrate the occasion. Create a ritual that will be helpful to the anxieties of both the new driver and the parents.

For example; have a special meal to celebrate the event. While at the meal table, give your teenager a key ring to mark the achievement. Speak to your child in a way that will not be interpreted as nagging of their new responsibilities.

Let them know of the anxieties that we as parents experience because we love and want to protect them. At the end of the meal, pray as a family, asking God for protection on your child as they drive themselves and others around.

There are many other occasions when we can create rituals which are relevant in family life, such as when a family member is sick, celebrating a success, losing a first tooth. The possibilities are endless.

**How can we create Family Religious Rituals?**

Over the years, much has been written on the importance of religious rituals. One of the most practical books in relation to these rituals and family life is in *Dolores Curran on Family Prayer* by Dolores Curran (1997). In this book she presents what she terms as the "ten commandments" which help families incorporate religious ritual into family life.

1. **Let the rituals serve the family, not the family serve the ritual.**

   Rituals are not static. They are constantly changing to meet the needs of our family as our children grow and mature. At times, the rituals that we have celebrated over many years may no longer be nourishing in their present form.

   In other words, do not become "slaves to the ritual". Adapt rituals or create new rituals, which are more effective to the purpose of the celebration and life situation.

2. **Initiate at least one annual religious ritual in your family.**

   One way to introduce a religious ritual into our family celebrations is to celebrate one new religious ritual each year. Over time, we will have a selection of rituals, which we can celebrate within our homes.

   The possibilities are endless. Some suggestions include celebrating the anniversary of each family member’s Baptism. It is a wonderful opportunity to
thank God for the gift of faith. During Advent, make an Advent calendar with the family which unfolds the Christmas story.

3. **Rediscover and retain the ethnic religious traditions that are a legacy.**

There are many religious traditions and customs that are part of our ethnic Christian heritage. It is important to retain and recreate the rituals from our ethnic backgrounds that are most meaningful to us.

These contribute to our identity as a Christian family. Speak to elderly relatives to find out the customs and rituals of our roots. In this way, we will be preserving also an expression of our faith that is very much part of our tradition.

4. **Give your family rituals, time, space and planning.**

Planning is very important. Introducing rituals into family life does not just happen overnight. There are a number of considerations we need to take into account before these rituals become a natural part of family life.

First, we need to establish which rituals will be celebrated, and which new rituals will be introduced.

Second, we need to consider where the celebration will take place. Will it be in the lounge room, the dining room seated around the table, or outside.

A third consideration is to schedule a time which best suits the family.

Be realistic and recognise that the family will not accept all rituals that are introduced. Adapt it and try it again the following year before dismissing it.

5. **Get a book or two on family religious rituals.**

There are many books on the market on rituals. Buy or borrow a few and read them. Ask other families if they have books and share them around.

Books are a good starting point when trying to create new rituals. Adapt the rituals to suit the family. (some books are suggested at the end of this paper).

6. **Share responsibility for celebration and rituals among all family members.**

In many households the mother is usually the one responsible for organising and making things happen. This can be taxing and the ritual can become a routine rather than a celebration.

Share the responsibility among family members. Each family member can be given a task toward the celebration. For example; one person can be responsible for the planning of the ritual, another person can take charge of the prayer, while a third can be responsible for the symbols to be used for the celebration. Children can be very innovative, especially when they are given a task to do.

This not only allows the family to contribute to the celebration and thus have a sense of ownership but it also encourages and regenerates new ideas for new rituals and celebrations.

7. **Strive for a blend of the traditional and the new, the memorized and the spontaneous, the formal and the informal.**

Within our Catholic tradition, there is a wide range of ways in which we express our faith. We teach our children respect for the different religious traditions when we use a variety of rituals within our homes.

It is important to respect the traditional expressions
as well as more contemporary expressions. The richness of the faith is passed on when we include rituals such as, the morning offering, grace before meals, the Hail Mary, the Our Father and the experience of prayers such as the rosary.

These traditions will be lost to our children if we do not ritualise them in our family life.

8. Open your family celebrations to the wider family.

Invite other people to share in the rituals. The spirit of a celebration is to open it up and welcome all who come.

9. Overcome the awkwardness and the embarrassment by celebrating first with those you are comfortable with it.

Be realistic. Not all of us are comfortable praying or singing or holding hands around the table, especially if this is a new experience. Join a family within your neighbourhood or parish who are comfortable celebrating in this way. Participate in their celebration and observe how it is done.

Take the ceremony away and reproduce it for yourselves. Initially family members may be embarrassed and feel uncomfortable. Don’t force anyone into doing anything they do not want to do but invite them to be present. Start simply.

10. Help other families learn to celebrate God openly and lovingly.

Faith and celebrations are to be shared. As your family becomes more comfortable with celebrating religious rituals, share your experience with others. Suggest ideas to help other families pray and ritualise together. Invite them to one of your celebrations, and spend time helping them to create their own rituals.

"In other words, take the blessings you have experienced from your family rituals and pass them on. That’s the way the Good News is spread.” (Curran 1997, p. 41)

Conclusion

Rituals are very important in our lives. As families create and celebrate religious rituals together, we communicate the love, care and trust we have for one another. At the same time they help us to acknowledge God. They help us to share in each other’s joy and pain. They renew our spiritual life, create memories and remind us of our family and faith stories.

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Bibliography


Some Practical Resources


FOCUS QUESTIONS

• Recall a religious ritual from your childhood. What memories does it evoke?

• Name a religious ritual which is special to your family. What makes this a special celebration? How do you ritualise it?

• What inspired you most as you read this article?

Give it a Go

• What religious ritual could you introduce for the coming year? How would you celebrate it? What symbols will you use to ritualise it?

Be pro-active,
pass this publication onto your family members and others within the community.
Invite another family to join one of your rituals.