The Importance of Family Prayer

For many of us, our introduction to our faith traditions came from our family. Our parents, together with other family members, such as brothers, sisters, grandparents, helped shape our physical, emotional, intellectual and social development. At the same time they also had a major influence in our spiritual formation. Now that we are adults, we in turn are influencing the spiritual lives of our young ones.

One of the greatest influences in shaping the spiritual lives of our children is the experience of prayer. If faith begins at home, then so does prayer. It is in the home that prayer is discovered and deepened. As we relate with our family members day in and day out, we learn also how to relate with God.

This issue of Living, Loving, Learning aims to help parents focus on the importance of prayer and offers practical examples of how prayer can be incorporated within family life.

What is Prayer?

Prayer is a response to a loving relationship with a loving God.

(Wooden 1992 p.10)

Prayer can be described in various ways but two elements are always noted, relationship and communication. In the words of St Theresa of Lisieux, prayer is ‘raising our mind and heart to God’. She describes prayer as essentially conversation with God; listening to God’s presence and responding to that presence.

Prayer is central to our lives as Catholics because it is about relationship with God. According to O’Sullivan (1995 p.18) “prayer is an essential part of our Christian living. It is not just a duty; rather it is part of the reality of what it is to be a Christian”.

As Christians, we are always in relationship with God, whether we are aware of it or not. It is through prayer that we are awakened to the presence of God in our lives. It is the expression of our relationship with God, the means through which we develop an intimate connection. As we strive to develop a truly personal relationship between ourselves and God, we become aware that God is always present.

Just as communication is essential for developing our relationships with one another, it is also the source of our prayer life with God. God has given each of us the ability to communicate so that we can share our thoughts and feelings, and deepen our relationships with one another. Communication keeps our relationships alive.

Prayer is the source of our communication with God. Through prayer we communicate our inner-most feelings, thoughts and desires with a God who loves us intimately. As we pray our relationship with God is deepened.
As our children pray, they too come to know God personally. They come to appreciate that God personally cares for them and is always with them. In the words of St Augustine, “God loves each of us as though there is only one of us”. They come to understand that God knows them intimately because God listens to them.

**Expression of Prayer**

As there are a variety of ways in which we can describe prayer, there are also a variety of ways in which we can pray.

Prayer is much more than the formulas we learned as children. This is not to say that formulas are not an excellent way to learn how to pray. Jesus himself gave us a formula by which to pray. When Jesus’ disciples came to him and said, “Lord, teach us to pray,” he gave them the words of what we know today as the Lord’s Prayer. Throughout time, this prayer has been the classic model for Christian prayer.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to three expressions of prayer: vocal prayer, meditation and contemplative prayer.

**Vocal Prayer**

Vocal prayer – prayer that is spoken – is probably the most common expression of prayer. Vocal prayer enables people to come together as a community to raise their voices to God. Vocal prayers include traditional prayers such as the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary and the responses of the Mass.

**Meditation**

This expression of prayer is a prayer where we think about God. It involves a reflective process, involving the mind, imagination and the will. Meditative prayer allows us to reflect on the teachings of Jesus as they apply to our daily lives. To help us meditate we focus on words, such as the words of the Gospels, allowing our imagination to picture ourselves talking with and listening to Jesus.

**Contemplation**

Contemplative prayer is resting in God. It is a passive expression of prayer. When we contemplate we share our inner thoughts and feelings with God whom we know listens to our prayers. This expression of prayer is particularly suited to teenagers as it allows them to just be with God. Words are not important here, what is important is to be open to listen.

Each of these expressions comes from the heart and opens us to the presence of God. Using a variety of expressions enriches our prayer life for, as we change, our prayer will change and so our expression will need to change.

**The purpose of Prayer**

When we pray, we offer prayers of praise to God. These prayers express our appreciation of God. We offer prayers of thanksgiving for all the gifts and blessings we have received and continue to receive from God. We ask for God’s forgiveness for the times we have failed to live as God wants. Through our repentance we express our desire to restore our relationship with God. We ask also for our personal needs and for the needs of others. As we pray, God draws us closer, guiding our thoughts, making us spiritually stronger in our daily lives.
**Praying Together as a Family**

*Prayer cannot be taught. It has to be discovered.*
(Wooden 1992 p.10)

Praying together as a family requires planning and time. It needs to be constant and made an integral part of family life. There are at least three things we need to consider in order to make prayer a living experience within family life.

**Modelling**

He taught me to pray, but not as a conscious effort on his part. It was not by conventional teaching methods. No professional techniques here. ... He simply taught me to pray. (Wooden 1992 p.21)

Throughout his life, Jesus taught us the importance of setting time aside from our busy day to pray. Scripture tells us often that Jesus left his disciples and went away to a place of solitude, to pray to his Father.

As parents we ought to be people of prayer if our children are to be people of prayer. Children learn firstly from what they observe. In other words, we need to model prayer in the home before we can expect our children to pray. If we desire that our children develop a closer and personal relationship with God, we need to be a model to them of how this can be done within the context of daily life.

Jesus taught us the importance of prayer by constantly and continually praying to his Father throughout his life. Jesus urges us to do the same.

*For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.*
(Matthew 18:20)

To keep the relationship between ourselves and God open, we need to pray often. We need to make a conscious effort to set time aside from our busy life and become aware of the presence of God in our lives so that we are open to what God is calling us to.

Creating a family prayer life is an important responsibility. It means making time and space for prayer. It may seem a difficult task in today's busy society, with so many competing activities. Yet this is precisely why it is important for families to find time to pray together.

Family prayer does not just happen. It is like most rituals that we have developed. It takes planning, especially in the beginning, but the more we pray together as a family, the easier it becomes.

**A Time and a Place**

Praying together as a family is a great way to celebrate the presence of God in the midst of everyday life and we bring God's love and peace into our home. Through prayer, families can discover how to live a faithful life in the everyday world. As parents, we can help our children become aware of God's presence by providing times of quiet and an atmosphere conducive to prayer.

The first step to introducing family prayer is to nominate a time that fits the family's schedule. Such times may be meal time, in the morning, or before going to bed at night. Other times which offer great opportunities to gather for family prayer are the special occasions celebrated within your family, such as birthdays, anniversaries, welcoming a new baby, to name a few.

Many families also make time for more extended prayers, perhaps just before or just after the evening meal while the family is still at the table.

*No child is too young to be blessed by the environment of prayer. The child who can understand the meaning of words can begin to understand the basic and simple essentials of prayer. These early experiences of talking to Jesus can lay the foundation of a lifelong meaningful walk with him—communing, interceding, and becoming mighty in prayer.*
(Wooden 1992 p. 11)
When we develop the habit of prayer, it begins to permeate all aspects of our lives. We become aware of God's presence in our lives and we are able to share the happenings of our daily lives with God and with one another. On the other hand if we do not make time for prayer each day, our relationship with God will weaken and we may find ourselves slowly drifting away.

**Involve all Members**

All members of the family can pray, no matter how big or small. Each can contribute in their own special way. The youngest child can be part of family prayer the same as the older children. They can, for example, hold hands with other family members and be quietly attentive during grace and bedtime prayers. They can reply also with the word, 'amen' after prayers led by others.

As children grow, they can take a more active part in family prayer. Build their interest by using creative ways of involving them, giving them parts to say and tasks to perform, such as lighting the candle. Give them the opportunity to choose prayers, to lead the family prayer time and to prepare a prayer service for a special occasion. Give them the option of being able to sing, meditate, listen to a recording, or discuss their needs and concerns. Variety in prayer styles will help keep children interested and, at the same time, broaden their faith experience.

**Formal Prayers**

Introduce the Sign of the Cross, the Lord's Prayer, and the Hail Mary when you feel the child is ready. Don't wait for them to learn these prayers at church or at school. They will have much more relevance if they are introduced within the context of family prayer times. Teach them the meaning of the prayers at a level that they can understand. At times it may be appropriate to introduce only a portion of the prayer depending on the age of the child.

**Spontaneous Prayer**

Encourage spontaneous prayer. Children, especially, find spontaneous prayer quite natural. It allows them to simply talk to God in their own words, sharing their inner thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to praise God, give thanks to God, to ask God for their personal needs and for the needs of others and to express their desire to restore their relationship with God by asking forgiveness.

**Examples on How to Introduce Prayer Into Family Life**

There are many ways in which prayer can be introduced into family life. It is desirable to begin when the children are small, but don’t feel that this cannot become a reality if the children are older. The following four ideas are only suggestions that may become a springboard for what is possible. Each family has different needs and situations that need to be considered so there is no one way that is deemed the correct way.

**Catch the Moment**

**Relate prayer to everyday events of family life.**

**FAMILY OUTINGS**

Relating prayer to the everyday events of family life enables children to understand the significance of prayer. For example, if you have gone for a stroll to the park during the day, remind your child of the experience. Ask your child what they enjoyed at the park. They may answer “the ducks”. Lead them to share what they appreciated about the ducks. Then ask who do they think made the ducks. If God is part of your daily conversation they will probably answer “God”. From here ask your child to thank God for the ducks. The little prayer from the heart may be a simple as “God, thank you for the ducks because they can fly”. As time progresses your child’s prayers will become more personal and in tune with their own life experiences.

**BEDTIME**

If praying as a family may seem a little daunting at first, begin with a simple bed time prayer as you tuck each of your children in for the night. Simply making the sign of the cross with your children is a start to prayer. The sign of the cross is a powerful prayer that raises awareness within your children of the presence of God.
A way of raising your older children’s awareness of the presence of God within their day is to spend a moment with them as you tuck them in at night. Ask them firstly to reflect on the day with a simple question such as “What do you remember about today?” Allow your child to share their experiences. If, for example, your child reveals that they had a fight with someone at school, encourage your child to ask God for forgiveness and the help to make up the next day. Pray with gratitude for the experiences which have been a source of joy and blessings, or in thanksgiving for what your child has received.

MEAL TIME

A natural meeting time

The family meal is an opportune time for family prayer. For those parents who find it hard to pray as a family it is a great time to introduce prayer. It is a natural gathering time. Meal time is not only a time to be grateful for the gift of food we have before us, but it is also a time when we can stop and remember God’s presence in the events of the day. It can be a time when we remember those who are in need of our prayers such as sick family members or local or world events. It is also a time we can thank God for the special achievement of a family member or ask for a blessing for a child’s birthday.

One way to introduce mealtime prayer may be as follows. The first night, place a candle on the table. As you approach the table light the candle and ask the children (and other adults) to put their forks down. State your intention. Tell your family members that tonight you wish to share a prayer with them. Say a simple prayer, for example: Dear God thank you for the food we are about to receive and bless those who have no food tonight. Amen.

The following evening, place the candle on the table and repeat the instructions about not eating until after the prayer. Ask a member of the family to light the candle and then repeat the same prayer. By the third night the family will be reluctant to begin the meal until you give the cue. The table will automatically have the candle placed on it. You may find that one of the children will ask to light the candle and the other members will wait for the prayer before they begin their meal. Repeat this until the end of the week.

During the second week ask a different member each night to light the candle and say the prayer. At first they will pray the prayer that you have introduced, but over time the prayers will become more personal as each child becomes comfortable with praying and the prayers will become more personal and relevant to the situations within your family life. If we persist and make an effort not to break the cycle, before long mealtime prayer will be an integral part of family life.

Praying the Rosary

Many parents have expressed the desire to introduce the family rosary but have childhood memories of how they prayed this prayer by rote every night and it made no sense to them. For ways which may be more effective, especially in the initial stages, we need to be creative. The first thing to remember is to schedule a time and stick to it so that everyone knows when to come together. Second, initially it is probably more effective to pray one decade of the rosary a night or even a week, in a prayerful and reflective way, than to recite the prayer off by rote. By praying one decade at a time, it allows the family to reflect on the scriptural focus of each decade. As the family becomes more comfortable with the structure, you may then increase the number of decades per week or night to complete a Mystery.

Don’t Despair!

As parents, we may find that, at times, everyone does not participate wholeheartedly at prayer time. Some members may not always want to be part of the family prayer. This may be more evident as our children approach teenage years. Don’t despair! Continue to invite them to join the family at prayer time. They should feel welcome, not only by your words, but also by the beauty and power of the experience. Remember, even when one of our children chooses not to participate, they will draw strength from their experience of the family as a praying community. Again it is important that we remain prayerful parents and be witnesses to the things we believe to be important for the nurturing of faith. As we have already discovered our children watch and listen to us more than we imagine.

Conclusion

Praying families make lasting impressions on all their members. Though children grow up and leave home, they never forget the faith environment of their earliest years. Our prayer experiences, such as mealtime blessings and bedtime prayers, remain with our children as they grow up, leave home, and have children of their own. They will recognise that prayer and Christian life are inseparable because through prayer our relationship with God is constantly deepened. Prayer will become a sustaining presence in their lives and a source of abundant blessing.

Children touch their world as they understand it and at the level they experience it. If we teach them that prayer is tangible, they will perceive it that way and practise it that way. (Wooden 1992 p.89)
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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SOME PRACTICAL RESOURCES

A Reflection on the Lord’s Prayer for Parents
Our Father
Who is God for me? How do I address God?
Who art in heaven,
Do I acknowledge God’s presence in my life? Am I open to the invitation of eternal happiness?
Hallowed be thy name,
Do I respect God’s name by giving special honour to God?
Thy kingdom come,
Do I work towards making God’s kingdom known?
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Do I promote the values and attitudes that comply with living according to God’s will?
Give us this day our daily bread,
Do I trust God to provide for my daily needs?
And forgive us our trespasses,
Do I seek forgiveness when I have sinned?
As we forgive those who trespass against us,
Do I forgive others as readily as God forgives me?
And lead us not into temptation,
Do I pray for the strength and courage to follow the path that leads to eternal happiness?
But deliver us from evil.
Do I ask God to keep me close and to care for me when I am experiencing difficult times?
Amen.
Do I convincingly acknowledge that God is my God?
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Be pro-active, pass this publication onto your family members and others within the community. Invite another family to join one of your rituals.